

Equipment
YUUMIKAN

Illustration by **KOIN**

9

Skills

Fire Magic
Flame Summon
Magic Seal
Fast Charge
MP Cost
MP Recovery
Magic Boost
Spell Boost
Freeze
Burn

Bofuri
★ I Don't
Want to Get
Hurt, so I'll
Max Out My
Defense.

We
New
Skills

Chain Fire / Burning



Skills

Fire Magic
Flame
Magic
Fast Ch
MP Cos
MP Reco
Magic Boos
Spell Boos
Freeze
Burn

Bofuri
★ I Don't ★
Want to Get
Hurt, so I'll
Max Out My
Defense.

We
New

Skills

Chain Fire / Ray of Light

Bofuri★ I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.★



MII

Mii's STATS

Lv86
HP 635/635
MP 1740/1740
[STR 20]
[VIT 70]
[AGI 85]
[DEX 30]
[INT 150]

Welcome
New World
Online





“There’s much
to be said for
cooperation.”

“You
were a
huge
help.”

“Can’t wait
for day
three!”

In Maple Tree’s
event camp



Skills

Fire Magic X / Detonate / Flame Spear / Flamation
Magic Mastery X / Magic Secrets X / Fast Chant
MP Boost (L) / MP Cost Down (L) / MP Recovery Speed Boost (L)
Magic Boost (L) / Spell Boost / Mana Amp
Reinforced Magic / Insight / Shearing / Poison Nullification
Paralyze Nullification / Stun Nullification / Sleep Resist (M)
Freeze Nullification / Burn Nullification / Eternal Flame
Flame Empress / Eruption / Flare Impetus / Inferno Cage
Immolate / Pyre / Blue Fire / Chain Fire / Raging Inferno
Reaper's Mire / Cataclysmic Eruption

MII'S STATS

Mii

Lv86

HP 6354

STR 200

VIT 200

Bofuri
★ I Don't ★
Want to Get
Hurt, so I'll
⑨ Max Out My
Defense.

YUUMIKAN

Illustration by **KOIN**

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Welcome to
NewWorld Online.

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Bofuri: I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense., Vol. 9
YUUMIKAN

Translation by Andrew Cunningham • Cover art by Koin

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ITAINO WA IYA NANODE BOGYORYOKU NI KYOKUFURI SHITAITO
OMOIMASU. Vol. 9

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0850 1048 4070 7603

NewWorld Online Status

||| GUILD **Maple Tree**

||| NAME **Maple**

HP 200/200 MP 22/22

LV **60**

PROFILE

The Tankiest Great Shielder

She was a gaming noob, but by putting all her points in defense, she grew so tanky that all attacks just bounce right off. The kind of girl who finds fun in everything, her imaginative leaps astound those around her. When she fights, she negates all incoming attacks while unleashing a barrage of counter-skills.

STATUS

STR 000 VIT 15180 AGI 000
DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

||| New Moon: Hydra ||| Bonding Bridge
||| Night's Facsimile: Devour/Lure of the Deep
||| Black Rose Armor: Saturating Chaos
||| Toughness Ring ||| Life Ring

SKILLS

Shield Attack Sidestep Deflect Meditation Taunt Inspire HP Boost (S) MP Boost (S) Heavy Body
Green's Grace Great Shield Mastery VII Cover Move IV Cover Pierce Guard Counter Quick Change
Absolute Defense Moral Turpitude Sheep Eater Hydra Eater Bomb Eater Indomitable Guardian
Giant Killing Psychokinesis Fortress Martyr's Devotion Machine God Bug Urn Curse Zone Freeze
Pandemonium I Heaven's Throne Nether Nexus Crystallization Cataclysmic Eruption Unbreakable Shield



TAMED MONSTER

||| Name **Syrup** A turtle with high defense
Giganticize Spirit Cannon Mother Nature etc.

I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
Welcome to NewWorld Online.



6892 1179 0406 0847

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Sally** LV **60**
HP 32/32 MP 130/130

PROFILE

The Unhittable Assassin

Maple's friend and partner, she's got a good head on her shoulders. Her top priority is to ensure she and Maple enjoy the game together. Light armor and twin daggers are the core of her combat style; her raw gaming talent and astonishing focus allow her to evade all attacks.

STATUS

STR 125 VIT 000 AGI 170
DEX 045 INT 060

EQUIPMENT

Deep Sea Dagger Seabed Dagger
Surface Scarf: Mirage Oceanic Coat: Oceanic
Oceanic Clothes Bonding Bridge
Charnel Boots: One Step in the Grave



SKILLS

Gale Slash Defense Break Inspire Down Attack Power Attack Switch Attack Pinpoint Attack
Combo Blade V Martial Arts VIII Fire Magic III Water Magic III Wind Magic III Earth Magic III
Dark Magic III Light Magic III Strength Boost (L) Combo Boost (L) MP Boost (M) MP Cost Down (M)
MP Recovery Speed Boost (M) Poison Resist (S) Gathering Speed Boost (S) Dagger Mastery X
Magic Mastery III Affliction VIII Presence Block III Presence Detect II Sneaky Steps I Leap V
Quick Change Cooking I Fishing Swimming X Diving X Shearing Superspeed
Ancient Ocean Chaser Blade Jack of All Trades Sword Dance Shed Skin Web Spinner VII
Ice Pillar Subzero Domain Nether Nexus Cataclysmic Eruption Water Wielding IV

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Oboro** A fox with skills that bewilder foes

Fleeting Shadow Shadow Clone Binding Barrier etc.

I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
Welcome to NewWorld Online.



NewWorld Online Status

||| GUILD Maple Tree

||| NAME **Chrome** LV **80**
HP 940/940 MP 52/52

PROFILE

The Unstoppable, Unyielding Zombie Tank

Known as a top player since the early days of *NewWorld Online*. Reliable, looks after people, everyone's big brother. Like Maple, he's a Great Shielder. His unique gear gives him a 50 percent chance of surviving any hit with 1 HP, and he has a ton of healing skills that make him extremely tenacious.

STATUS

STR 135 VIT 175 AGI 040

DEX 030 INT 020

EQUIPMENT

||| Headhunter: Life Eater

||| Wrath Wraith Wall: Soul Syphon

||| Bloodstained Skull: Soul Eater

||| Bloodstained Bone Armor: Dead or Alive

||| Robust Ring ||| Impregnable Ring

||| Bonding Bridge



SKILLS

Thrust Elemental Blade Shield Attack Sidestep Deflect Great Defense Taunt Bulwark
Impregnable Stance Iron Body Heavy Body HP Boost (L) HP Recovery Speed Boost (L) MP Boost (M)
Green's Grace Great Shield Mastery X Defense Mastery X Cover Move X Cover Pierce Guard Counter
Guard Aura Defensive Formation Guardian Power Great Shield Secrets VII Defense Secrets VI Burn Resist (L)
Stun Nullification Paralyze Nullification Poison Nullification Sleep Nullification Freeze Nullification
Mining IV Gathering VII Shearing Spirit Light Indomitable Guardian Battle Healing Reaper's Mire
Crystallization Stimulation

TAMED MONSTER

||| Name **Necro** An armor monster that really shines when worn

Polterguard Impact Reflection etc.

I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
Welcome to *NewWorld Online*.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Iz** LV **66**
 HP 100/100 MP 100/100

PROFILE

The Ultimate Crafter

A specialized crafter, she's proud of her work and particular about the results. Her gaming style is all about making clothes, weapons, armor, and items. Originally, she wasn't that active in combat, but her stock of attack and support items now makes a huge difference.

STATUS

STR 045 VIT 020 AGI 080

DEX 210 INT 080

EQUIPMENT

Blacksmith Hammer X

Alchemist Goggles: Faustian Alchemy

Alchemist Long Coat: Magic Workshop

Blacksmith Leggings X

Alchemist Boots: New Frontier

Potion Pouch

Item Pouch

Bonding Bridge



SKILLS

Strike Crafting Mastery X Crafting Secrets X Enhance Success Rate Boost (L) Gathering Speed Boost (L)
 Mining Speed Boost (L) Crafting Quantity Boost (L) Crafting Speed Boost (L) Affliction III Sneaky Steps V
 Keen Sight Smithing X Sewing X Horticulture X Synthesizing X Augmentation X Cooking X Mining X
 Gathering X Swimming VI Diving VII Shearing Godsmith's Grace X Observer's Eye Attribute Endowment IV
 Botany Mineralogy

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Fey** A spirit that helps with item creation

Item Boost Recycle etc.

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 Welcome to NewWorld Online.



NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Kasumi** LV **76**
HP 435/435 MP 70/70

PROFILE

The Solitary Sword Dancer

A katana-wielding female player with a strong knack for solo play. Always calm, she's good at assessing the big picture. Yet she's frequently left reeling by Maple's and Sally's outlandish antics. Has a range of katana skills that let her contribute to almost any combat situation.

STATUS

STR 205 VIT 080 AGI 090

DEX 030 INT 030

EQUIPMENT

Yukari, the All-Consuming Blight

Cherry Blossom Barrette

Cherry Blossom Vestments

Edo Purple Hakama

Samurai Greaves

Samurai Gauntlets

Gold Obi Fastener

Cherry Blossom Crest

Bonding Bridge

SKILLS

Gleam Helmsplitter Guard Break Sweep Slice Eye for Attack Inspire Attack Stance
Katana Arts X Cleave Throw Power Aura Armor Slicer HP Boost (L) MP Boost (M)
Attack Boost (M) Poison Nullification Paralyze Nullification Stun Resist (L) Sleep Resist (L)
Freeze Resist (M) Burn Resist (L) Longsword Mastery X Katana Mastery X Longsword Secrets V
Katana Secrets VII Mining IV Gathering VI Diving V Swimming VI Leap VII Shearing Keen Sight
Indomitable Sword Spirit Dauntless Sinew Superspeed Ever Vigilant Mind's Eye

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Haku** A white snake that ambushes foes from the mist

Supergiant Paralytoxin etc.



I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
Welcome to NewWorld Online.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Kanade**LV **52**

HP 335/335 MP 250/250

PROFILE

The Whimsical Genius Mage

A certifiable genius with an androgenous look and a memory beyond compare. His mind once left him avoiding human contact, but Maple's innocent cheer broke through that shell. He can store all manner of spells in the grimoires on his book stacks, ready for use in combat.

STATUS

STR 015 VIT 010 AGI 090

DEX 050 INT 110

EQUIPMENT

Divine Wisdom: Akashic Records

Diamond Newsboy Cap VIII

Smart Coat VI

Smart Leggings VIII

Smart Boots VI

Spade Earrings

Mage Gloves

Bonding Bridge



SKILLS

Magic Mastery VIII Fast Chant MP Boost (M) MP Cost Down (M) MP Recovery Speed Boost (L)
 Magic Boost (M) Green's Grace Fire Magic VII Water Magic V Wind Magic VII Earth Magic V
 Dark Magic III Light Magic VII Sorcerer's Stacks Reaper's Mire Magic Meld

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Sou** A slime that can copy a player's abilities

Mimic Divide etc.

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 Welcome to NewWorld Online.



5615 1896 1000 8003

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD **Maple Tree**NAME **Mai**LV **48**

HP 35/35 MP 20/20

PROFILE

Conquerer Twin

A beginner player with an extreme attack build, she and her younger twin sister, Yui, were scouted by Maple. She does her best to help everyone out. The twins have the highest DPS in the game, and their dual-wielding hammers vaporize anything that gets close.

STATUS

STR 490 VIT 000 AGI 000

DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

Black Annihilhammer X Black Doll Dress X

Black Doll Tights X Black Doll Shoes X

Little Ribbon Silk Gloves

Bonding Bridge



SKILLS

Double Stamp Double Impact Double Strike Attack Boost (L) Hammer Mastery X

Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing Destroy Mode

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Tsukimi** A bear monster with distinctive black fur

Power Share Bright Star etc.

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Welcome to NewWorld Online.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME Yui

LV 48

HP 35/35 MP 20/20

PROFILE

Annihilator Twin

A beginner player with an extreme attack build, she and her older twin sister, Mai, were scouted by Maple. She's more positive than Mai and quicker to recover. The twins have the highest DPS in the game. Throwing Iz's custom-made iron balls lets them take out enemies at range.

STATUS

STR 490 VIT 000 AGI 000

DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

White Annihilammer X White Doll Dress X

White Doll Tights X White Doll Shoes X

Little Ribbon Silk Gloves

Bonding Bridge



SKILLS

 Double Stamp Double Impact Double Strike Attack Boost (L) Hammer Mastery X
 Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing Destroy Mode

TAMED MONSTER

Name Yukimi A bear monster with distinctive white fur

Power Share Bright Star etc.

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NewWorld Online Status



GUILD

The Order of the Holy Sword

OVERVIEW

The number one guild in strength and fame

A huge guild with top-class players, they easily won the guild wars in the fourth event. Always at the front lines of the stratum conquests and revered by players far and wide.

Guild Members



NAME **Pain**

Champion of the first event and has maintained his lofty status ever since. His onslaught in the fourth event came within one step of defeating Maple.

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Ray** A dragon with silver scales



NAME **Dread**

Nicknamed Godspeed, he's a fast-moving dagger wielder. Second place in the first event. Like Sally, he runs circles around his foes.

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Umbra** A wolf that hides in shadows



NAME **Frederica**

A mage who can multiply the effects of any spell. She uses that for offense, defense, and support. Talks like a slacker but is quite competitive. Sees Sally as her eternal rival.

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Notes** A yellow songbird



NAME **Drag**

A power fighter with a giant ax and brutalist armor. Strong enough to place fifth in the first event, and his ax can split the ground itself.

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Earth** A golem made of rock

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NewWorld Online Status ||| GUILD Flame Empire

OVERVIEW

A well-organized guild, dedicated to Mii

Mii—the Flame Empress—is the kind of person people flock to, and that makes her guild uniquely unified. To get the maximum impact out of Mii's ludicrous fire powers, they hold the line and support her with healing and MP recovery.

Guild Members



||| NAME **Mii**

A mage specialized in fire, thanks to her Flame Empress skill. High DPS and flashy moves galore but really burns through MP. Acts the role of a dauntless leader, but the real Mii is super into cute things.

TAMED MONSTER

||| Name **Ignis** A flame-wreathed phoenix



||| NAME **Marx**

A trapper with all kinds of ways to mess up his foes at range. Extremely cautious by nature, he is trusted by everyone in the guild for his instincts on where to lay a trap.

TAMED MONSTER

||| Name **Clear** A chameleon good at disappearing



||| NAME **Misery**

Mii's go-to backup healer, she's got a ton of great skills that let her transfer MP, bring back the dead, and dole out group heals. This has led to the guild members calling her the Saint.

TAMED MONSTER

||| Name **Belle** A long-haired white cat



||| NAME **Shin**

His Splinter Sword skill turns his sword into a bunch of tiny blades, letting him fight like no one else. Unbeatable on sheer quantity of hits. Long-standing rivalry with Kasumi.

TAMED MONSTER

||| Name **Wen** A hawk that controls the wind

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Welcome to NewWorld Online.

NewWorld Online Stratrum Guide

First Stratrum

New *NWO* players are met by this archetypal fantasy world. Clear blue skies and bountiful natural splendor whet the appetite for adventure. What seems like a floor meant to ease new players into the systems has a number of extremely difficult dungeons. Maple and Sally both started here and established their current fighting styles.



Maple acquired the skill: Absolute Defense.

Second Stratrum

Three months after *NWO* launched, a patch added a whole new map. Accessible after beating the first-stratrum boss, players found forests, mountains, and wastelands waiting for them. New NPCs and quests abounded, and some rewards offered very good skills.

Sally acquired the skill: Superspeed.

The Second Event

Players were tasked with gathering three hundred medals scattered across a map. Maple and Sally met Kanami, Kanade, Sprag, and others during this event, making good friends they play with to this day.



Maple acquired the skill: Hydra.

The First Event

NWO's first-ever event was a multiplayer battle royal! Maple beat more than 2,000 players without taking damage and placed third despite having just started the game. Quite a spectacular debut.



Once the second event was over, the game added a guild system, and our favorite tank founded Maple Tree. The members each had their own unique style, and the second stratrum only made them stronger.

Kanade acquired the skill: Sorcerer's Stacks.

Maple acquired the skill: Saturating Chaos.

Maple acquired the skill: Martyr's Devotion.

Chrome acquired a unique series.

The Third Event

This involved defeating event-limited monsters and gathering their drops. Iz used that wool to make fluffy clothes!



Welcome to NewWorld Online.

Third Stratum

A cloudy sky teeming with machines and devices. A massive thematic shift from the floors below, the map itself was all about dramatic elevation shifts—encouraging players to equip flying items. Legends claimed the building in the center of town housed the Machine God, and Maple got caught up in a related storyline.

|| Iz acquired a unique series.

|| Maple acquired the skill: Machine God.



The Fourth Event

A free-for-all among guilds of all sizes. The Order of the Holy Swords, led by the first event's victor, Pain, and Flame Empire, led by the popular fire mage, Mei, battled all the time, but with only eight members, Maple Team went up against them head-on and managed to place third.

|| Maple acquired the skill: Pandemonium.



|| Kasumi acquired Yikari, the All-Consuming Right.



The Fifth Event

An exploration event. Four special monsters appeared around the field, each awarding a different number of points. Since it was Christmas, there was a random chance of dropping presents.



Fourth Stratum

A month after the fourth event, a new map appeared—a land of everlasting night, with red and blue moons hovering in the sky above. Wooden buildings give it an old-time-Japan vibe. Progress into the main town was blocked off by torii gates requiring clearance passes. Kasumi has a major thing for the traditional Japanese style and made it to the center faster than anyone. She transformed the entire city into a magical wonderland where yokai roamed the streets.

Fifth Stratum

A celestial paradise with fluffy clouds as far as the eye could see. Even the dungeons and monsters are made of clouds. Lots of vertical maps and unstable footing requiring careful play. There's even a secret boss—the King of Light. But Maple's Absolute Defense and Mai's and Yu's overwhelming DPS easily crushed it.

|| Maple acquired the skill: Heaven's Throne.



The Sixth Event

Exploring a jungle with no health recovery allowed. Maple met her rival, Pain, and fought alongside him, showing off her defensive skills. Meanwhile, Sally got a skill that upped her mobility options.

|| Sally acquired the skill: Web Spinner.

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Sixth Stratum

The players found themselves in a desolate ground studded with ancient mausoleums. The trace patches of fog only made it seem spookier. Guilds have homes on every level, but on this stratum, it looked like an abandoned ruin. The monsters were all ghosts and undead. Sally has never been able to handle horror and quickly logged out. Maple had to go exploring for the both of them.



Meanwhile, Maple and Sally found a way to evolve Syrup and Oboro—to their great delight.



The Seventh Event

A dungeon event in which players scaled a ten-story tower. There were several difficulty levels, and the medals awarded varied accordingly. Maple and Sally conquered the highest difficulty—just the two of them.



Sally acquired the skill: Water Wielding.

Seventh Stratum

Plains brushed by a pleasant breeze, volcanoes, snow-capped peaks, floating islands—terrain of all types welcomed the players. But the biggest draw—the monsters found here would join you. Most of Maple Tree had not yet tamed a monster, and everyone formed a bond with a pet that matched their play style.

The Eighth Event

Split into a prelin and a main round, the prelins were scored on number of monsters defeated and time until you died. The results determined the difficulty of your main round map and the rewards you'd get. Everyone in Maple Tree successfully made it to the highest difficulty. The top guilds are now eagerly waiting for the main round to begin.



To be continued...

Welcome to NewWorld Online.

the Event's Main Round

In the eighth event's prelims, Maple Tree achieved their goal—all members had earned the right to play on the highest difficulty in the main round.

Quite a few of them—specifically Maple, Kasumi, and Iz—had cleared the prelims by fighting like field bosses, throwing out massive AOE attacks or worse, and terrifying all onlookers in the process. A very different style from, say, Sally, who'd just quietly racked up kills. Unlike the main round, the prelims had a PvP element. Since the twins' extreme builds meant high chances of dying when solo, everyone had been worried about their prospects, but the monsters they'd tamed really helped a lot. They'd managed to fend off all attackers, and they looked very relieved now that it was all over.

But the prelims were only the opening act. The true challenge still lay ahead, and what they did from here on out would decide everything. For this next round, they'd be sent to the event map as a party.

Their goal for the main round: survive the full three-day experience and come away with a whopping five medals. But not just that. Dungeons dotted the map, and clearing those would provide more medals. The rules allowed you to split up your party and search for those dungeons or cluster together to ensure your survival.

That said, starting with the whole guild together was certainly reassuring. Especially since Maple could use Martyr's Devotion to dramatically improve everyone's survivability. And this time, they all had pet monsters to help them fight.

Mai and Yui had Tsukimi and Yukimi, bears that could turn giant and carry the twins around while attacking their enemies with light and stars. Kasumi's white snake, Haku, had the Supergiant skill and stats to match that bulk. Iz had the spirit Fey—it might look like a tiny glowing light, but it could change elements at will and enhance all the items she made. Chrome's Necro was an armor monster—he could literally wear his pet and transform it to bolster his offense or defense. Finally, Kanade had a transparent slime named Sou, which could copy any player's appearance and skill set.

Maple Tree had spent their time on the seventh stratum finding pets that perfectly matched each of their play styles. They'd proven their mettle in the prelims, and the guild was ready for anything.

With their monster pals by their side, their combat performance would be steady as a rock. And they'd all gained new skills, which

gave them more options on the battlefield. Even if they split up, they'd still be plenty strong.

As the start of the main round drew near, each guild member's heart filled with anticipation and nerves—they hugged their pets tight, did some level grinding, or went hunting for one last new skill.

After a few days of leveling their pets, it was time for the main round to begin. The guild members gathered to go over their plans one last time and waited to be transported to the event map.

Maple Tree would be tackling the highest difficulty available—and surviving till the bitter end would net each of them five silver medals.

In the moments before the countdown, the eight members huddled up for a final strategy session.

“Word is you can get extra medals by beating monsters,” Sally said. “I don’t want to just survive—I want us to get as many as we can. Given the main round’s structure—do we stick together the whole time or take the risk and split up to go hunting? We can’t do both.”

Sally had a point. Aggressively gathering more medals would result in a stronger guild if they succeeded. And in this event, medals were rewarded on a party-wide basis—so if Maple got a medal, the other seven would get one, too.

If all eight went their separate ways and took out powerful monsters, they’d maximize their winnings, but there was a high chance someone would end up dying—missing out on the completion bonus.

“It says the powerful monsters show up at night. If we regroup then and spend the rest of the time out and about, we’ll probably earn more.”

“Yeah, survival is certainly vital, but this is our chance to really rake in the medals.”

“Even if we do split up, we’re better off forming two parties based on compatibility,” Kanade said.

Everyone nodded and immediately decided they’d put Maple, Sally, and the twins on one team and Kanade, Iz, Chrome, and Kasumi on the other.

This might have seemed like a drastic split, but this way, the three guild members who could die from a single hit were much safer going with Maple. For that reason, the discussion was over in seconds.

“We’ve gotta do our part, Mai!”

“Yeah, good luck, Yui!”

“It’s about that time for it to start, right? Oh, speaking of, looks like we’re going in.”

“All right!!” Maple cried. “Let’s make it through this thing!”

She raised a fist high, and everyone joined her—and the eight

members of Maple Tree were swallowed in light.

When the light dissipated, they were on the event map—the same one from the prelims.

Maple Tree's starting location was all sand and rocks. Almost like a combination desert and wasteland.

"At least there are good sight lines. No other players nearby..."

"But there *is* a reception party!"

The sand around them was heaving, and giant worms emerged from beneath, each large enough to swallow the entire party whole. They spotted Maple Tree, and their maws gaped, lunging toward them.

"Okay! Martyr's Devotion!"

Maple fired up the skill, placing everyone under her protection. As sand clouds billowed, every hit was met by her defense—and she soaked it all. Everyone else summoned their pets and went on the offense.

"No time to set anything up... Fey, Item Boost!"

Iz slammed a boosted attack-buff item on the ground, and a red glow bathed the party.

No sooner was the buff on them than Mai and Yui were on their Giganticized bears' backs, charging into the fray.

When the whole guild was together, the twins were their main DPS.

"Power Share! Bright Star!"

At their command, Tsukimi and Yukimi fired spherical projectiles that did massive damage to all the approaching worms. But the monsters still had HP to spare—this map's difficulty was no joke.

"Get 'em, Kasumi and Sally!"

"Indeed! Blood Blade! Haku, Supergiant, Paralytoxin!"

"Oboro, Binding Barrier!"

Kasumi's pet snake grew rapidly, then shot forward, wrapping itself around a worm and injecting it with paralytic poison. Oboro's skill stopped a second one.

"Necro, Death Flame!"

The moment they were immobilized, Chrome—wearing Necro—unleashed a torrent of fire, piling on the damage. Meanwhile, the worms the twins and bears had been pummeling gave up the ghost and burst into motes of light. The surviving worms sensed the odds were against them and retreated beneath the dunes.

Once the dust settled, the area was calm again.

"Oh! Wow! All your pets are so strong!"

"We couldn't take them *all* out, but...with you keeping us safe, fighting is way easier."

“Mai and I weren’t the only ones who scored a kill! They’re all so good!”

Yui’s and Mai’s eyes were gleaming with awe, but Sally, Kasumi, and Chrome looked surprised.

“Hmm? I didn’t do *that* much.”

“Neither did I. I mean, Haku’s damage is sizable, but...”

“Heh-heh-heh... Sou! Over here.”

Seeing the baffled looks, Kanade laughed softly, and someone stepped out from behind the white snake’s towering frame. White hair, pink highlights, a dress covered in frills and ribbons—Sou looked *just* like Yui.

“Huh? Th-that’s me!”

“Yep. I borrowed a bit of your DPS. Very impressive.”

Sou had a skill that let it copy a player’s appearance *and* stats. So if it was mimicking Yui, it did a lot of damage.

“Wow, Kanade! Your pet is so strong! That really broadens our strategic options...”

“But there *is* a time limit.”

Even as he spoke, Sou was wreathed in light—and reverted to the original transparent slime.

“I can’t keep it going for long, and the cooldown is very long, but it is nifty. My pet can transform into whoever I have it memorize.”

When the guild split up later, Kanade’s group would have no problems dealing damage.

“Oh, Sally, did any medals drop?”

“Hmm, I’ll take a look.”

Sally did a quick circuit of the area but didn’t see anything of the sort.

The worms had been as powerful as any regular boss, but it seemed they were considered trash mobs according to the standards of this event.

“If we let our guards down, we’ll be dead in no time.”

“Guess we know what the highest difficulty is now. Okay, first up—let’s find somewhere we can rest. Everyone, climb onto Haku.”

Everyone else put their pets back in the rings, then climbed aboard. The giant snake slithered off across the desert.

The dunes soon gave way to a forest and a marsh. Since there were no monsters around, the guild decided to split up there. Sally checked her map and offered a suggestion.

“The map shows locations for party members, so we just need to regroup before the powerful monsters start appearing.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Chrome said. “We’ll take the forest. Maple’s party, you hit that marsh.”

“Got it! Let’s find some medals!”

“Yup. If we see any promising monsters, we’ll take ’em down.”

As Maple waved good-bye, Chrome’s party headed out to scour the forest.

“Okay, Martyr’s Devotion is still going, so let’s check out this marsh!”

“Works for me. Mai, Yui?”

““All set!””

“Then off we go!”

With their new pets, Mai and Yui could now move faster than Syrup. Mai and Sally rode on Tsukimi and Yui and Maple on Yukimi. They headed out across the bogs.

“This map is really huge, huh? Where do we even start?”

“Heh-heh-heh. I suspected this would happen. Look here.”

Sally sent all three a message.

Attached to it was a photo of the map Sally had made during the prelim.

“Since we knew it would be the same map, I marked anything that looked suspicious. It oughtta help. And I sent this to the other team, too.”

“Nice, Sally! Um, if we’re here...”

Examining their maps, they spotted a marked location nearby.

“Oh, Maple! There’s one in the marsh!”

“You’re right!”

“Yup. Wanna go check it out? Mai, I’ll navigate.”

“You got it! Let’s get a move on, Tsukimi!”

They set off with renewed purpose. There were no obstacles in their path, just water and short vegetation.

“It’s somewhere in the middle of this marsh?”

“Yep. I mean, not like they’ll make it *easy* on us...”

Figures were rising out of the ponds and land around them. Dolls made of either water or mud were sloshing their way.

“Wh-what do we do?”

“I got this! Syrup, Sinking Ground!”

Maple had her pet turtle change the texture of the soil, and the marching dolls lost their footing, sinking into the ground.

“Our main goal is survival, so...Mai, Yui, let’s run for it!”

“True, they aren’t casting spells, and they move super slow... which means if they catch us, we’re in real trouble. I’ll make footholds!”

““Got it!””

They had the bears use Star Step, enhancing their movement speed. Sally made platforms in the air, and they bounded up and over the dolls.

“Keep that up!”

“I’d like to save Maple’s skills for the real threats, so we’re gonna be relying on the two of you.”

““Okay!””

While Syrup immobilized the dolls, Sally made platforms or Ice Pillars, giving the bears plenty to climb across and avoiding taking any fights all the way to the mark on her map.

Their destination was an extra-large body of water, with a small island floating in the center. The island itself was covered in pink flowers—a marked contrast from the surrounding area.

But the lake itself was teeming with water and mud dolls, so Maple could see it only through her binoculars.

“Well, Sally? It look any different?”

“There weren’t *this* many monsters in the prelims. But the landforms are the same.”

“Yeah...it *does* look like a potential medal spot.”

“What do you think?”

“Well...we can’t get any medals if we die here.”

Even ordinary monsters were a threat on this map, so throwing yourself into the den of anything especially strong carried a risk of ending the event with nothing to show for it.

“Still! We said we’d conquer everything and get all the medals we can.”

Maple nodded emphatically, and the others agreed.

“If we try and get to the island on our bears, we’ll have to fight.”

“Don’t worry! That’s what Syrup’s for.”

Maple Tree had a lot of mountable pets now. But only Syrup could fly.

“We probably aren’t meant to, but...let’s take the skyway. From what we’ve seen so far, not much risk of being shot down.”

Their minds made up, Maple called Syrup out and had it use Giganticize. Everyone climbed on the turtle’s shell, and they sailed over the heads of the swarming dolls to the flower-covered island.

“Syrup should be able to land here. Down we go.”

The instant the turtle landed, the island lit up. it was the all-too-familiar sign of an imminent transport spell.

“Don’t worry! Martyr’s Devotion’s still up!”

No matter what happened on the other side, Maple would keep them safe.

There was a flash, and the four girls were gone—leaving empty marsh behind.

“Hokay, we’re here!”

“Underground, hmm? Bet this is below that island. The walls and ceiling are all wet and muddy.”

“True...and there’re so many passages that branch off...”

They had been sent to a subterranean dungeon. Everything around them was some shade of brown.

The start point was a round, open area, with six paths leading out. No need to worry about squeezing through anything, but the whole place was *moist*. There was even standing water on the ground in some places.

“I’m sure there are more of those mud dolls. And this time we might have to fight!”

“Yeah, it’ll help if we can one-shot ’em.”

““That’s what we’re for!””

With so many paths, just standing there thinking about it wouldn’t get them anywhere.

“Can I pick?”

“Sure, go ahead. I’m not seeing any hints.”

They decided to put their faith in Maple’s luck.

“Ew, it’s all slippery underfoot.”

“Very. At least we aren’t actually getting dirty—”

“Whoa, already?”

Sally had been right. Dolls were rising out of the puddles and mud. They were super slow, and Mai and Yui had no trouble hitting them.

““Double Strike!””

Before the dolls could do anything, the twins’ blows landed, and the dolls blocking their path were blown away, spraying water and mud everywhere.

“Wow! That’s something.”

“...But they didn’t die.”

The water and mud weren’t turning to light; they were simply forming new dolls.

Their party was now facing several times the original number. If these dolls kept multiplying, they could be in real trouble. As the twins hesitated, they got hit.

“Maple! We good?!”

Since both types of dolls had attacked, any weird status ailments would affect Maple herself—that was how Martyr’s Devotion worked.

“Um...hold on. Hmm.”

Sally glanced at Maple, then at the mud-splattered twins, making sure nobody was getting hurt. Ever vigilant.

“Oh, I can’t move! And...the timers on my cooldowns all stopped.”

“Immobility and a cooldown freeze. That sure could wipe an

ordinary party. They probably hit hard—and there's a ton of 'em."

"Sally! How do we beat these things?!"

"We've just gotta try stuff out!"

Maple might've been stuck in place, but that was all. There was no shortage of stuff she could do just standing still. And right now, Marty's Devotion was all they needed from her.

Certain they weren't in danger, Sally let herself relax a bit. With Maple buying them infinite time, they could take it slow and work out how to dispatch these dolls.

Eventually, trial and error showed them that if they used fire damage on the mud dolls and electric damage on the water dolls, they'd go down without cloning themselves. But any other kind of attack and you'd just wind up with twice as many enemies.

Because Maple was on defense duty, the rest of the party had been free to try every method without fear of danger, but their experiments had left them with more dolls than they could count. The passage was completely blocked, and the mass of dolls reached the ceiling.

The heap got so high, it actually toppled over on them, and Mai and Yui had to crawl out from underneath—carefully, so as to not accidentally attack.

"Okay, mystery's over, so now we just gotta work through this horde."

"“Yeah...””

"Th-there sure are a lot..."

Since Maple couldn't move, going another way wasn't an option. And their enemies kept inflicting the status effects. The only way Maple was leaving this spot was if they killed all these things.

It took a looong time to get through them all.

"Whew, finally over! Yui, Mai, great work."

"Sorry! I couldn't help at all."

"You're good, Maple! You kept us safe!"

"And we need to save you for the boss fight!"

Maple's skills were superpowerful, but most of them had hard use limits. And during events like these, they'd be fighting all day, so that could really hurt.

"Let's keep going and find this boss! We know how to beat the dolls now!"

"Yep. And we'll have you handle said boss, Maple."

"That's what I'm saving myself for!"

Now that they knew the trick, they made short work of the trash mobs, moving steadily forward.

Ordinarily, even exploiting their weaknesses wouldn't let you one-shot these foes—they were designed to make players burn through

resources. But Mai and Yui could just hit them any which way. Each of them had applied a different element, so Mai took the mud dolls, Yui took the water ones, and Sally mopped up anything that got past them while Maple kept her skill up so none of them took damage.

Since they were immune to the damage and debuffs, these dolls couldn't stop them.

Merrily devastating the doll population, they pressed onward until they finally located a door that just screamed *boss room*.

"There were so many that it took us a while, but we're finally here."

""We're ready!""

"Cool. Then here goes nothing!"

Maple pushed the doors open, and they stepped cautiously through. The room was filled with puddles of water and mud—and there was a yellow-green moss growing all over the ground.

And before them were two giant dolls, each more than four yards tall.

One was made of mud and covered in moss and wildflowers. The other was made of water. Clearly enhanced versions of the dolls they'd already fought a lifetime's supply of.

"Bit worried about the moss, but let's try the same elements for starters. One at a time!"

""Okay!""

Maple aside, the other three targeted the mud doll first, wreathing their weapons in fire and heading in. Maple's role was to keep the water doll busy so they could focus on laying down the hurt.

"Let's get it in one, Mai!"

"Mm!"

Fired up, the twins brought their hammers crashing down.

Naturally, bosses in *NWO* weren't balanced around their ridiculously high DPS, so their words rang true, and the HP bar shattered.

The mud doll sluggishly hit back, but Martyr's Devotion shunted that all to Maple. That froze the cooldowns on her skills, but it wasn't a big deal.

"I'm not about to be outdone!"

Sally could dodge, whereas the twins couldn't, and Sword Dance meant each dodge buffed her damage. She was slashing away at the mud boss's legs.

""One more!""

When Sally's blows made it stumble, the twins swung their hammers, and the mud doll's HP hit 0. Too easy.

""Yes!!""

“Oh! Sweet!”

“...Wait, something’s wrong!”

Like Sally said, the doll was swelling up from the inside. With a bang, it exploded. Mai and Yui caught the brunt of the blast but, thanks to Maple, took no damage.

“We’re good; we’re good... Yikes?!”

She’d nullified the mud, but mid-boast, Maple’s HP dropped by 20 percent. She looked around, searching for the cause.

“Mai! Yui! At your feet!”

“Er, oh!”

They were standing in a heap of mud, and there were brown seeds mixed in with it, and vines growing up from those had wound around their feet. These seemed to be doing a drain attack.

Maple’s HP dropped another 20 percent while the twins tore the vines off.

“Maple, get Syrup out! Mai and Yui, on me.”

Sally led them through the seeds, while Maple made Syrup float. All three of them leaped aboard. Since the seeds reacted only to people on the ground, this got them out of harm’s way and let them heal Maple up.

“Whew. That was a shocker! Ugh, but now we can’t get down!”

“Yikes...and they’re gonna bring the mud doll back to life.”

“But if we’re not on the ground, does that matter?”

“We’ve been practicing! We can fight from here, too!”

Taking the twins at their words, Maple and Sally sat back to watch the show.

Maple was still soaking all incoming mud and water. This let the twins pull iron balls out of their inventory.

New-and-improved versions of the ones they’d used in the fourth event, these had spikes on them now and were much bigger. They applied a fire element and got ready to pitch.

““Heave! Ho!””

With an adorable little cry, the twins hurled the balls, smacked the mud doll in the face, and blew away the HP it had just regained. The spiked balls embedded deep in the ground behind it where they fell.

“Nice! We hit it!”

“Practice paid off!”

“You two are the only ones who can practice *that*. But your aim has definitely improved.”

They’d played catch a lot in their downtime. Clearly, it was proving rather useful. They took aim at their next target, this time brandishing balls crackling with electricity. Full-powered pitches burst right through its body.

“Wow! Oh, wouldn’t the balls hit even harder if you slugged them with your hammers?”

“Uh...we can’t.”

“The balls break! Iz is working on making harder ones.”

Since these balls were just an item, they could take only so much punishment. They’d tried once, and there’d been a horrifying crack—and the iron had shattered like snow.

Since whacking them was out of the question, they’d been forced to spice up the balls instead.

“Well, we can’t exactly help out with balls that size... Guess all we can do is watch.”

““We’ve got this!””

Each time a ball punched a hole through the water boss’s body, it thudded heavily into the ground.

Seeds were flying everywhere, but that made no difference—the last pitch took out the boss’s head. Now that both dolls had fallen, they and the seeds burst into light. They heard the bloop of a notification informing all members of Maple Tree that they’d earned a silver medal.

“Whew, we did it! And got a medal!”

“Mm, nice. But we’ll have to be careful. If Syrup couldn’t fly, that would have been close.”

“True. That revival trick would have been nasty in a normal fight where we had to worry about getting hit.”

“We’ll have to use the monsters outside to predict what’s in a dungeon and avoid stumbling into one we’re ill-equipped for. Oh, we’re getting booted out...”

“Guess we can’t just hang around here where it’s safe.”

“Well, our goal is to get as many medals as possible, so let’s keep moving.”

“All right! The more the merrier!”

The glow enveloped the girls, and they were transported out of the dungeon.



“Oh, Maple’s team nabbed a medal!”

“They probably cleared the marsh dungeon. Looks like Sally’s map is a pretty solid guide.”

The forest team was, for the most part, riding around on Supergiant Haku’s head.

When they ran into monsters, Iz tossed out items, Kanade cast debuff spells, and then they let Haku constrict them.

Chrome and Kasumi didn’t have that many ranged options, so

they mostly polished off any enemies that slipped past the others.

“It might only be three days, but I’m glad I overprepared.”

Iz’s strength came from the incredible variety of items she could make. Their versatility and power were both top-tier, but each time she ran out of a specific item type, her options grew more limited. That was the curse of the crafter.

But unlike other crafters, Iz could create items from gold alone. And she had a skill that let her use her workshop anywhere—as long as she had the cash reserves, she could top up her item stock anytime. A big chunk of her event prep had involved grinding for gold—and she’d come in with enough to buy several guild homes. Ready for anything.

“We’re almost at the place Sally marked.”

“Cool. Bring it!”

Haku slithered onward, and ahead, they spied a tree with arcane markings carved into the bark.

“That must be it. Nothing else around anyway.”

“If that’s a magic circle, should we try touching it?”

Everyone nodded, so Kasumi had Haku slither close. She reached out, and the carvings lit up, transporting them away.

They found themselves...still in a forest. Trees all around.

The only difference was that beyond the trees were walls made of massive trunks and vines, completely fencing them in like a natural cage—a fairly sizable one, at that. They braced for combat, but there was no sign of any threat.

“Seems like nothing...but it can’t be, right?”

“Agreed.”

They remained on guard, then heard a whistle of wind. Chrome reacted first.

“Cover!”

There was a clang of projectiles bouncing off his shield, spinning away. Chrome quickly took a closer look.

There were three *kunai* with bombs attached, sparks flying from the fuses.

“Tch, Kanade, all you!”

“Sou, Enhance Function, Spirit Light!”

The slime was mimicking Kanade, and it pulled a grimoire from its stacks, activating a defensive skill. An instant later, there was a boom; then fire and smoke filled the area. When the dust settled, they’d taken damage but were still standing.

“If Sou uses it, the effects are weakened, so damage nullification becomes reduction. But looks like that was enough.”

“Yeah, big help.”

“I’ll heal us up.”

“But where did those come from?”

“Those were *kunai*, so we could be dealing with a ninja. And after seeing how strong those bombs were, we can’t exactly split up to search for it.”

Those *kunai* were likely not its only attack, either. Iz and Kanade didn’t have much HP and it was a genuine worry they might die from any blow.

“Should we try looking? Sou’s relatively strong; limited-use skills should make that safe enough for now.”

“Guess we gotta. If we can’t even see what we’re fighting...”

Locating it was their first priority, but they spent a while wandering around the woods to no avail. Projectile after projectile came their way, but still no signs of the assailant.

“Hmm, Kanade’s stock of grimoires is keeping us going, but we’re not getting anywhere like this.”

“What do we do? If we can just find the thing...”

Iz fretted about this for a moment but then made up her mind. “Well, there is a way...just not one you’re gonna like.”

“Oh? Lay it on us.”

“Since we’re in a finite space...it’ll take time to prep, but I can blow the whole room up.”

“Ah. Huh? No, that could work. I think.”

More or less carpet-bombing to flush it out. Chrome had never once imagined this suggestion would come from Iz of all people, but since no one had any better ideas, they went with her plan.

“The thing you did in the prelims?”

“Yep. But I unlocked new items to craft, so I can hit the air above us now, too.”

Iz took out one of these items—it was a box with a propeller on it and a string dangling below. Iz tied several bombs to it and let it float upward. It stopped a set distance above them, hovering.

“Not exactly cost-effective, but no use being stingy.”

“That sure looks gnarly. How’s it trigger?”

“Another item takes care of that. Right, we’ve got the air covered, so let’s prep the ground and trunks.”

“Our enemy wants to blow us up, so let’s blow them up instead. What do we do?”

“I’ll leave a safe zone in the center. These items do damage to everything in range, so don’t you dare step out of that space.”

One step outside, and even Chrome’s notorious defense and survival skills would not guarantee he would live through the stacked damage, debuffs, and status effects.

Using Sou’s spells and Haku’s sheer bulk to protect the items she

set up, Iz led them on a loop of the forest, placing explosives everywhere.

“Okay, all ready. It’s gonna be real loud and real bright, so brace yourselves.”

Like she had in the prelims, she strung the strands of water through the air, and when she sent electric pulses down those, the forest detonated.

Loud was an understatement. It made the boom of their foe’s *kunai* sound like a pop. Everything outside their safety zone was incinerated.

“The boss itself isn’t down yet!”

“Right, then let’s move like we planned. Assassin’s Eye!”

This was one of the daily random skills Kanade got from Akashic Records. If a monster or player had active status effects, it made them take more damage and also revealed their location.



“There!”

“C’mon, Kasumi!”

“Got it!”

Chrome donned Necro, enhancing the range of his cleaver. Kasumi summoned a floating arm on either side of her. Both closed in. The ninja before them was poisoned, paralyzed, on fire, and frozen all at once.

“Final Blade: Misty Moon!”

“Reaper’s Mire! Necro, Death Flame!”

Once they had eyes on their target, it was easy. Both their attacks struck home. Before the ninja could even move, it was out of HP and disappeared.

“Whew...that worked out.”

“Is it over?”

“Yup. Well, it didn’t die, but same difference.”

“Good, I’m pretty low on damage reduction skills.”

They regrouped, on guard against surprises—then heard that bloop and got the same *medal earned* message Maple’s party had.

“Okay, not bad for a first day!”

“We covered a lot of ground in the forest, and rigging this place up took a while. It’s getting late.”

“Yeah, Haku makes movement easy, but we’ve come a long way.”

They made sure to stay in contact with Maple’s group, careful not to get too far from them. Once they were ready, their party set out to find the next dungeon, eyes peeled for a good place to spend the night.

After the marsh dungeon, Maple's party hit a few more of Sally's marks, but they all came up empty.

"Oof, this is harder than I thought."

"Yeah. And it's almost time for the tough enemies to show up, so maybe we're better off regrouping with the others. Don't wanna get stuck in the middle of a long dungeon."

They still weren't sure just *how* tough these vaunted enemies were, so best not to take any risks. Clearing dungeons was all fine and dandy, but they didn't want to miss out on the medals for surviving the event itself.

"I'll ping Chrome real quick."

While Sally was in her menus, they rode Tsukimi and Yukimi toward a clearing.

In this event, there was no PvP factor, and in wide-open spaces, there was a low risk of monster ambushes, which meant relative safety.

"Oh, they also stopped dungeon diving and started looking for a good spot to make camp. They might have found a promising cave."

"Nice! Should we move in that direction?"

"We can sleep sound!"

"They're sending coordinates. Mai, Yui, can you take us there?"

"You bet!"

The two spurred their bears onward, across fields and forests, headed for Chrome's location.

They ran into monsters on the way, but these posed no threat, and they were soon safely reunited with their fellow guild members.

"Oh, there they are! Hey!"

Maple waved, and the others spotted them coming.

"Oh, Maple! You did well for yourselves, right?"

Every guild member had earned two silver medals. If they could earn three more *and* survive to the end of the event, they'd reach their ten-medal goal. That would be enough to buy a rare skill or item from the medal exchange.

"And look, we found a good cave to camp in. Right this way!"

Chrome led them all into the cave interior. It went pretty far back but, unlike dungeons, had no light fixtures. There were several open spaces, connected like an ant nest to the biggest chamber at the back.

"It sure looks like a dungeon... Are we sure nothing'll spawn in here?"

“Yeah, we came across several dungeony-looking places like this. Probably dummies or intended as resting spots.”

“Then we’ve gotta get this place ready for nightfall! Make it nice and pleasant!”

A bare rock cave was hardly the ticket for anyone who wanted to get a comfortable rest. They’d need to remodel before taking any R and R.

“There are items we can place down without them vanishing on us. Didn’t exactly bring a lot of furniture, but I can make some now.”

“Very nice,” Kanade said. “Then I’ll take a chunk of your items and go set up defensive traps.”

““We’ll help!””

“Time’s limited. Maple and I’ll help establish a perimeter.”

“Yup! I can do that!”

Given Maple’s build, the members of Maple Tree were generally better at holding a position than they were at breaking into someone else’s. Limited entrances and the power of Iz’s items could turn this cave into an impregnable fortress.

Maple also took an armful of items, and they set about customizing the space.

“Hmm, what first? It’s pretty big. Maybe better to make sure nothing can get in.”

She did her usual and plopped down a Venom Capsule. That was just a start—over time, she’d expand it until the room was filled with poison.

“Cool. But that won’t be enough. If they attack from the passage, it’ll burst.”

Maple’s poison was no ordinary poison, and it had a chance of instantly killing foes. If it happened to hit something directly, it could kill outright.

“...Oh! Didn’t Iz give me...? Yep!”

Wading through her poison bubble, Maple began dropping items. These were traps that would react to attacks by spraying water and knocking the attacker away. But Maple wasn’t trying to knock away the monsters—just her own poison. By placing a ton of these around, she blocked off one side of the passage and hopefully ensured the poison wouldn’t flow toward her party.

“Hmm. Not seeing anything else good. Oh! Heaven’s Throne!”

She situated her throne in the narrow entrance and filled the gaps around it with leftover wood, completely closing off one side.

“Okay! One room done! Next!”

Fortifications complete, she dashed off to the next room. After a few more chambers, she ran into Mai and Yui.

“Well? How’s it going?”

“Augh! Maple!”

“D-don’t come in...!”

“Hmm? Whoa...aughhhh!”

Maple had already stepped in—and stepped on something that had dropped from the ceiling: a boulder as big as both her arms outstretched. It plummeted fast and smacked her right on the head. It bounced off with a clanking sound and rolled away...hitting more switches and dropping more boulders.

When it finally stopped, Mai and Yui started bustling around, clearing away the rocks. They found Maple unharmed at the bottom of the pile.

“Th-that was a shocker! Sorry I messed up your traps.”

“No problem! I’m just glad you’re safe, Maple!”

“I’ll help you set them back up. I can’t summon giant Syrup in here... Okay, ride these shields!”

Maple changed up her gear and used a skill to equip three shields. She used two of them to give the twins rides up to the ceiling.

“Urgh, I’m gonna have to be more careful if I check out any other rooms.”

“If you step carefully, you *can* make it through, so we shouldn’t have any problems getting out.”

“Oh, right. Uh-oh...nobody can get through one of mine...”

Maple might not have been the best at trap planning. She was already regretting some of her decisions.

That first room would definitely destroy anything that tried to enter, but that also meant her guild would have to stay clear.

“I’ll need to talk with Sally, maybe redo it.”

“Wh-what did you do?”

“Eh-heh-heh...well...”

As she answered Yui’s question, they finished fixing the traps and left the twins’ room.

Mai and Yui’s work had also created a chamber of death, and she felt sorry for any monsters that wandered in.

The three of them hit the remaining rooms, setting falling rock traps and poison lakes, then returned to the back chamber looking pleased with themselves.

Half the chamber was now decorated. Lights and a table had been set up on one side and partitioned private rooms for relaxing beyond that. Iz may have gotten carried away, because there was a rug rolled out and even wallpaper. The front of the space was left unaltered, giving them room to fight any monsters that made it through the outer defenses.

“Wow, it’s so nice now!”

“Hey, welcome home. Done setting your traps?”

“Yep! We’re all good!”

“Ready for anything.”

“We’re mostly done here. Should be much more comfortable than it was during the fourth event.”

As a final touch, Iz placed a cannon pointed at the entrance. Then she put up some walls so intruders couldn’t swarm the place and wiped her brow.

“That was a lot of work but some good experience! Plus, it was pretty fun.”

“I-it’s amazing! You must have used a lot of materials. We’ll have to gather more.”

“I didn’t use anything *too*, too valuable. But I never say no to help!”

“Mai and I are always ready to pitch in!”

As they chatted, the others returned from their trap-laying.

“All set up! But we’ll have to be real careful on the way out. One false move’ll kill ya.”

They all clearly felt the same way, and that put ideas in Maple’s head.

“Oh! Right, what do we do if other players come in? They’ll get caught in the cross fire!”

“Hmm? Oh, I got that covered. I put a sign out.”

“Huh? You did? Thanks, Sally! What’s it say?”

“MAPLE TREE BASE CAMP. DANGER EVERYWHERE. SURVIVAL NOT GUARANTEED.”

“...Not wrong.”

“Couldn’t be more accurate.”

“True. So many traps.”

Now that they had their very own painfully dangerous dungeon, they took a breather, and it was soon evening. Time for the *strong* monsters to show up.

“Guess we’ll just wait and see what they throw at us.”

“Yeah. No telling what they’ll be.”

They moved to the edge of the battle zone, hiding behind the wall Iz had put there, weapons raised, ready to fight at a moment’s notice. There was a series of tremors up above. Something had come inside.

“Incoming.”

“Ready whenever.”

The mood grew tense. But the tremors gradually died down, and nothing burst in.

“...Did we kill them?”

“Probably... Might need to check on the traps.”

That would give them an idea of how tough these monsters were. And even if they had killed the threat, the traps would need to be

reset.

“Maple and I’ll go. Worse comes to worst, we can run for it.”

“True. And even if you set off a trap, Maple’ll soak it.”

They’d barely stepped out of the break room when a monster staggered into view, damage sparks spraying everywhere. It had horns like Maple’s Atrocity form, wings like a devil, and a spear in one hand. It tried to swoop toward them...and promptly fell to the ground, vanishing in a puff of light.

“Aw...it tried so hard to get through.”

“That’s...one interpretation. But remember, we want them dead so we can live.”

Their dungeon certainly made it hard to tell who the real villain was. They *were* the dungeon boss now. But this devil had given them one valuable piece of info.

“We probably don’t have enough anti-air defenses.”

“Riiight. Let’s scope things out and make some improvements along the way.”

Maple and Sally did a tour of the trap rooms, resetting them from the entrance on in. There were tons of materials left behind by dispatched earth-bound foes.

“Resetting everything seems more doable than I expected... Let’s get the others to come help.”

“Good idea! Mai and Yui can help with these massive boulders! Then we can seal off some paths to direct monsters toward the traps.”

“I’m all about it. We want a nice long nap, after all, so best to shore up our defenses.”

They took photos of the first-wave results and headed back in.

As the hour grew late, they reset all the traps and started to work out a sleep schedule.

“Hokay. Seems like these tough customers are gonna keep coming at us, so we’ll need to sleep in shifts.”

“We could just seal off the entrance entirely. Short work for the twins.”

“True! Mai, Yui, wanna do the honors?”

““Sure! No problem!””

They headed to the main entrance to this chamber and used some of the trap boulders to completely seal the way into the final chamber.

“Cool. If anything tries to force its way through that, we’ll know.”

“Now we can rest easy...,” Sally said, relaxing.

“Yo, Sally! Wanna play a game?” Maple yelled. She was at the table, as usual, with her inventory jammed full of this and that to help pass the time.

This was how they always did things. Sally smiled and moved to

join her. They'd swap turns playing games and resting as the night grew long.



Assuming this first night's threats would start to eliminate players, the admins were keeping a close eye on things.

"Well?"

"Mostly what we expected. Players with the better-tamed monsters are having an easier time surviving than we thought."

"Comes with the territory. And it encourages everyone to go find a good pet."

"These night horrors are definitely chewing through players."

"Seeing a big difference between groups that set up to defend and those that were just out in the open."

They checked the names of the surviving players.

"Almost everyone in the Order and Flame Empire. Obviously, both still have their guild masters."

"Yeah, they tamed really good monsters. Enough that they're just out free roaming despite the buffed enemies? Wow. Oh, how's Maple Tree faring?"

"They're in a cave. Looks like they gave up exploring for the night."

A pack of monsters was running in even as they spoke. The screen showed the results.

Everyone saw a parade of merciless instant death traps with little to no sign of the original cave remaining. The monsters were plunging enthusiastically into the cave, leaving only their death screams behind.

"What the...?"

"They made their own dungeon."

"This is worse than any we ever came up with."

"Is this a tower defense game now?"

The monsters were entirely eliminated, without anyone in Maple Tree lifting a finger.

A single step inside meant death. But the monsters couldn't help charging at the nearest players.

"I mean, we knew they wouldn't struggle with these monsters, but...if they use traps, there's not even gonna be any fighting."

"Let's hope the second day goes better. They'll probably come out once the sun rises."

"Maybe we should have made the caves smaller."

"Arguably."

"But if we had, they'd easily figure out which dungeons were

dummies...”

Too late now. They just quietly switched the feed away, checking other areas.

They slept in shifts, but since their dungeon was far more lethal than anything the developers had created, nothing ever reached their boulder blockade.

Sally and Kasumi had been on the last shift, and they went around waking up the others.

“Maple, it’s morning.”

“Ngh...yawn... Morning, Sally. We still good?”

“Nothing happened at all. Did hear lots of traps going off, but nothing broke through.”

“Awesome. Okay! Let’s get out there and do our worst!”

Maple slapped her cheeks to wake herself up, then left her partitioned room. She found everyone else ready to go exploring. With that, she did her bit as guild master and set a new goal.

“Today we’re gonna try to find three more medals! That way, if we all survive, we’ll get the full ten!”

“Which way we going today?”

Sally opened her map, but something was wrong. She tapped the panel with her finger.

“Uh, we’re not on the map.”

“Hmm, same here.”

“Mine’s the same. And looks like they’ve disabled the message function.”

With no way to tell where they were or talk to one another, they were groping in the dark. A big change from the day before and an ominous sign—all of them had their guard up.

“I guess we’d better stick together, then! If we get split up, we could be in trouble in no time.”

“Fair. Surviving the whole event is still our main goal. But if we do get split up, we’ll need some sort of signal.”

After a short discussion, they were ready to set out.

“...We’re all good on the signal?”

“...Yeah.”

“Cool! Then let’s roll!”

Since they’d filled the cave with traps capable of one-shotting friend and foe alike, Maple put up Martyr’s Devotion. Meanwhile, the twins cleared the boulders, and they headed toward the exit.

“If all eight of us are fighting together, we can beat any enemy!”

“True. Luckily, we got two medals the first day, so we don’t have to split up.”

Careful not to trigger the traps, they collected any items they could as they moved farther out.

“Whoops, I’ve gotta cancel Venom Capsule and get my throne back!”

If there were demonic monsters around, she might need Heaven’s Throne, which could cancel any skills classified as evil. It was a good idea to have all their cards ready.

Once they’d gathered everything they could, they finally left the cave. Outside, it was darker than the hour suggested. No stars in the sky, just a vast swath of darkness.

“Urgh, this looks bad.”

“Careful... Ack! Maple!”

The moment they stepped outside, a pitch-black magic circle appeared at their feet. It was as large as Maple’s Martyr’s Devotion, and they had no way of jumping off in time.

“I’m good! Ready to heal!”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than an oddly dark glow enveloped them. Maple screwed her eyes shut, bracing for damage—but nothing hit her.

“...Whew, I’m fine! Wait, where is everyone?”

Their suspicions had proven right. When Maple opened her eyes, she was all alone.

What’s more, when she turned around, there was no sign of their camp. She didn’t know where she was.

She checked again, but the map still wouldn’t show her location, and she still couldn’t message her party.

They’d been forcibly split up with no means of communicating... the worst of their predictions, but at least they *had* predicted it.

“Hang in there, everyone!”

Maple would just have to do her bit. Very glad they’d made contingency plans, she got herself ready.



Evidence suggested that each of them had been sent somewhere else. In the dim light, Sally put herself on high alert and headed for open ground.

“So that’s why the prelims were solo, huh? Maple...will probably be fine, but the twins... I worry.”

She could only hope Tsukimi and Yukimi would be able to protect their masters.

As Sally ran, she spied a black magic circle ahead. A monster emerged, the curled horns and sharp talons very devilish. It flapped its wings and leaped at Sally.

“Oboro, Binding Barrier! ...Crap, it didn't work?!”

Sally nimbly dodged the devil's arm, slicing its side as she passed and put some distance between them. The monster let out a sinister screech, and more black circles appeared around it, spawning smaller devils.

“Oboro, Whet Wisp!”

Sally's daggers were wreathed in fire, extending their reach. Grimly, she faced her foes down.

“More from behind...!”

The sounds of combat must have drawn them in. She detected rustling in the brush to the rear. Sally intensified her focus.

She couldn't afford to go down here.

Her first priority was to figure out how many monsters were behind her. She risked a quick glance over her shoulder and saw a familiar figure coming her way, fending off the monster attacks.

“Frederica?!”

“Oh, I thought that was you, Sally! Thank god! I was looking for a front-liner!”

Frederica dashed over to her, and they stood back-to-back.

“...At least take yours out first! And why are you here?”

“Sorry! I'll tell you after!”

“Fine! For now, let's kill these things!”

The situation demanded a temporary alliance. Both already had their weapons raised.

It was time to take the fight to the devils leaping at them.

“Multi-Firebolt! Notes, Round!”

“Oboro, Spreading Flames! Shadow Clone!”

Frederica's fiery missiles were further multiplied by her pet bird. Wreathed in flames of her own, Sally's blows were making fire leap from enemy to enemy. In the gloom, the whole area glowed red.



“Defense...seems unnecessary? Okay, Multi-Waterbolt!”

The handful of monsters with no AOE's were just not a real threat to Sally. Frederica kept an eye on her, doing her part to maximize Sally's DPS.

With Drag, she had to bust out Multi-Barrier all the time, but here she cast it on herself to minimize the damage she took. And if Frederica was taking less damage, she could attack more between heals. As she did, there was a roar from the rear. Sally had just cut down an especially large devil.

“Gotta finish off my side! Notes, Amplify!”

Like always, her spell generated a ton of tiny fires; then her bird's skill made them burn even brighter.

“C'mon, get 'em!”

The barrage scorched the remaining monsters, and their fires went out. The field was shrouded in darkness once more.

Their alliance might have been impromptu, but they'd sparred enough to know each other's fighting styles.

“Whew, you really saved my bacon.”

“You'd have been fine solo.”

“Ah-ha-ha, that obvious? It would have been close, though. The rest of my squad are super far away.”

“Hmm? Wait, how do you know?”

“Oh, there's a skill for that. I'm sure you can figure it out. I pinged 'em, but they're outta reach.”

That was why Frederica had been looking for reliable assistance. Since this event had no PvP element, Sally didn't see a downside to sticking together.

“Can't hit any dungeons if we don't regroup, and they already did.”

She seemed hell-bent on heading to the rest of her guild.

“You've got no way to get in touch with yours, right?” Frederica said, beaming. “Best you give up on 'em and hook up with us!”

She pointed the way, beckoning Sally on.

“Hmm. Well, gimme a second... Oh!”

“Hmm? Fireworks? Is that part of the event?”

It was pretty far off, but a boom and a burst of light lit up the starless sky.

“That's Maple's signal. She's over there.”

“You all brought fireworks?”

“No, she's just blowing herself up.”

“.....Um? Say that again?”

While Frederica was still processing, Sally set out.

“Uh...wait, wait! It's the same direction! Let's stick together,

okay?"

"Oh, sure. But if the going gets tough, don't be shocked if I ditch ya."

"Damn it! I was hoping you had no options and I could draft you!"

Grumbling about plans gone awry, Frederica followed Sally toward Maple's signal.

"Drag's useless, but Dread's pretty perceptive. He might have found someone."

"If you're gonna make a temporary truce, you'll want someone good. But you only get a choice if you find someone. Notes gives you good range, huh? That'll help us avoid ambushes."

"No comment. Oh, just spotted something that could be interesting. Wanna check it out?"

"From the gleam in your eye...it's a monster? No thanks."

"Another failed ruse!"

But that also proved that as long as Frederica had Notes with her, she could guide them around major clusters of enemies.

"Hmm, we planned for this...but I sure hope someone gets here soon."

Syrup was flying high, its silhouette blending into the darkness of the sky. Maple was on its back, periodically using her weapons to blast off and detonate herself. Eventually she got bored with ordinary explosions and started using items that would explode when the blast hit them. These made her look much more like a real firework, but she was too worried about the others to really enjoy this.

"Okay, one more! Commence Assault!"

Maple rocketed off her turtle's back. High above, she detonated all the bombs on her, closing her eyes and covering her ears as she did.

As a result, she failed to notice the devil swooping at her until it had a tight grip on her.

"Urp?! Ah, don't, you'll—!"

Just as it grabbed her, the bombs went off. The monster was instantly vaporized.

"Yiiikes...I'm not gonna make it... Syrup!"

Maple was falling the wrong way. She tried to reposition her turtle, but since she was making it float via a skill not meant for flight, it had never been particularly speedy.

She was plummeting straight to the ground. Should she let herself fall or detonate herself again and hope she could manage a precision landing? As she tried to make up her mind, something soft caught her.

"Hmm? Urk, how?"

"Are you okay?"

"You are certainly a constant source of surprise. What *are* you

doing, Maple?”

Maple had landed on the back of a giant bird—Ignis. The pet’s owner, Mii, was on board...and so was Mai!

“Mii! And...Mai? Why are you together?”

“I’m not inclined to abandon anyone from Maple Tree. I spotted her on the road and brought her along.”

“That’s right! Thanks again!”

“Be warned, Maple. It seems the edges of the map are being consumed in darkness. The farther out you go, the stronger the monsters get. They’ve already claimed several members of my party.”

“Okay, good to know! I’ll be careful. Hngg, I’ve gotta make this up to you!”

“...In that case, I do have a favor to ask.”

“What? I’m game for anything!”

Mii pulled two charms out of her inventory, handing one to each.

“Hold on to these. They’ll vanish when the event ends.”

“Are you sure? Um. Signal Charm...?”

There was no explanation text, so they both looked puzzled, but Mii said nothing more. She put them down on the ground, and Ignis flapped its wings, ready to fly away.

“May we meet again, and not in a battle over the last remaining medals.”

“Yeah, see you out there! And thanks!”

“Th-thank you!”

Mii waved a hand and flew away. Not how Maple had expected to find Mai, but now they were missing only six.

“Now I can keep you safe! This is going well. You and Yui have such low HP! I’m glad we met up so fast.”

“True! I feel much better now. It sounded like Flame Empire’s members have a way to contact one another.”

“Oh? Jelly! If we could do that, I could just rocket around to everyone!”

Having left Mai in Maple’s care, Mii rode Ignis away across the sky.

“Whew, glad I brought them together. They looked overjoyed. Gotta hurry!”

Mii pulled a crystal out of her inventory and broke it. This was something Marx had given her; it reacted to the Signal Charms his skill made, allowing her to see the locations of everyone holding one.

“Gah, only three party members left! Dungeon crawling’s gonna be much harder. Argh, that surprise teleport really devastated us. Mean trick, devs.”

She’d just have to start with the closest signal. It was moving

around a bunch, likely in mid-combat. Mii had Ignis fly faster, hoping to get there in time.

The darkness limited the range of everyone's actions, but if stronger players ran into each other, they often teamed up. In one such area, two top players were facing down a horde.

"Tch, there are just too many!"

"I've got the right element for it, but..."

Misery and Chrome were surrounded by dozens of monsters and were trying to find a way to break free. They'd fought together once back in the jungle, but this time they could both heal. Much of Misery's MP was keeping Chrome topped up, and he was busy standing between her and any blows, teetering constantly on the brink of death.

"Necro, Burst Flame!"

"Holy Spear!"

Misery's spell was effective against the devils swarming this field, but he was a tank, and she was a healing specialist, and neither of them had the DPS they really needed.

"I ain't dying! But we ain't killing 'em, either!"

"That is true. At least they've stopped spawning adds..."

Chrome and Misery both had damage reduction or nullification skills and ways to revive themselves. Going down once or twice was no big deal—a tenacity not common in Maple Tree. Chrome was swapping Necro's form back and forth between offensive and defensive modes.

"We can endure, but they're also fast, so...any ideas, Misery?"

"...Just hang in there! Help is coming!"

"I'll take your word for it! Stimulation! Necro, Polter Bolster!"

Thanks to this duo's healing focus, even though they took plenty of damage, they stayed alive.

This was a marked difference from fighting with Flame Empire. Chrome and his great shield didn't need to go on the offensive, so even when totally surrounded, he could keep Misery safe and buy a lot of time. It was certainly a tense battle, and Chrome's focus was gradually wearing thin. He was taking blows more often as time wore on.

"Dead or Alive is up to luck, so I sure hope your backup gets here soon!"

"Good news. She's already here."

"Hmm? Whoa!"

Right on Misery's cue, a giant ball of fire dropped on the monsters around them. Flames raced across the ground, far more powerful than

anything Necro could ever unleash. Where Chrome had been doing chip damage, now the monsters' HP dropped like a stone, and they exploded into puffs of light.

"Uh...wow..."

"Whew, that's a relief. Mii, thanks for coming."

"Glad you're safe, Misery. Is that another Maple Tree member with you?"

"Hmm? I'm not the first?"

"I gave a ride to one of the twins...Mai, was it? Dropped her off with Maple."

"Nice! Glad to hear it."

"Shin and Marx are still alive. We should regroup."

"Then...mind if I tag along?"

Both looked surprised by that suggestion. They weren't actually on the same side, after all.

"I mean, before I met Misery, I heard a lot of screams from other players. Given the scale of the map, if we're meeting players, then the teleport locations ain't entirely random."

That meant there were strong odds Marx and Shin were with other Maple Tree members. And Mii and Misery seemed like they could use a tank. Bringing him along helped them, too.

"I don't mind. Misery?"

"The more the merrier."

"Then climb aboard."

All three hopped on Ignis and took off to the next destination.

"Are they close?"

"A ways out. Over those mountains."

"They really didn't want us getting back together, hmm? Even if the field is shrinking, it's still huge."

"Things might be different by day three. But at the very least, we need to get a base up and running before the tough enemies appear."

The devils on the field right now were plenty strong, but they weren't as bad as the nighttime hordes. If they hit that hour without regrouping, a lot of lives would be lost.

"Then let's hope we can find some of my team... Hmm?"

"What?"

"Might be one of mine there. I recognize that explosion from the first day."

Chrome had spotted lightning and fire illuminating the darkness up ahead and remembered how scary their crafter was when she got angry.

"...What do we do?"

“You can keep asking, but...with just the two of us...”

Marx and Iz were holed up inside walls made of rocks and vines.

They were both players who needed lots of setup time to fight and had been busy running away when they bumped into each other.

“Marx, how long do you think we can hold out?”

“...With our current setup...m-maybe five more minutes?”

“I’ll craft like crazy, so we’ll have to trade off defending as we go!”

Iz opened up her workshop and started making something else. Marx’s prediction was right on the money—exactly five minutes later, the monsters broke through the wall, tumbling in.

“How’s this?”

Their incursion was blocked by an ice wall generated by an ice crystal Iz had crafted. As it went up, the two players changed positions, looking for some terrain to help them get away.

“I’ll handle this wave. You craft something else.”

“Okay. It’s a no-brainer, but this mess is really gonna cost me...”

One eye on the gold she had left, Marx and Iz traded off duties, setting traps or crafting items, struggling to stay alive.

“Ugh, this is a battle of attrition. Mii, c’mon!”

“...A cave! We might be able to hold out there!”

“Uh, that’s a bit far...!”

“I know a faster way!”

“Really? Great...uh...”

Iz had pulled a blob of water out of her inventory. She made it float at their feet.

“Fey! Item Boost!”

“This is definitely a Maple move!”

“Yup! Hang on tight!”

“Ah—!”

Iz grabbed Marx and stepped onto the water sphere. The strengthened item released a whole geyser, rocketing them both forward. They slipped right through the monsters and rolled into the cave entrance. But before they could brace for further combat, the ground at their feet lit up, and they were wreathed in light.

“Oh no...!”

“Augh! A teleport!”

It was too late to do anything, and they were forcibly transferred elsewhere.

When it was possible to see again, they found themselves facing stone brick walls. Sandy floors underfoot. A wall right at their back and no sign of the monsters at their heels—but this was possibly worse.

“We’re...in a dungeon.”

“J-just the two of us? Wh-what now?”

Two back-line support experts were not equipped to handle a boss on their own.

“The Signal Charm alone won’t bring anyone where we are now. Ugh, this is bad; this is really bad.”

“We’ve gotta think! Do we just hang out in the dungeon? Maybe someone else’ll stumble in!”

“If we linger too long, tough monsters’ll spawn... They hit us hard the first day.”

Marx shuddered at the memory, and Iz found that convincing.

“Then we’ve got no choice,” she said. “We’ll just have to clear it somehow.”

“Mm-hmm. Not seeing another option. Can’t afford to hold back, so... Clear, Transparency.”

The chameleon on Marx’s head used a skill, and the effect applied to them both.

“Now nothing will detect us unless we bump into it. Probably won’t work on the boss, and it didn’t work on the monsters outside—which sucked.”

“Got it. Still, good skill! Perfect for a trapper.”

“R-right?”

If they were invisible to trash mobs, then they could pick their way carefully through the dungeon.

“Sand...like the ruins in the jungle event.”

“Chrome and Kanade checked those out. It does seem similar.”

They moved on, and the sand rose up. A monster with a big spear and armor emerged, its body made of sand. Each step it took, sand scattered around.

“We’re good. Seems...like it can’t see us.”

“Best stick to the sides.”

Iz and Marx plastered up against the wall, waiting for the sand soldier to pass. Clear’s Transparency was working fine, and it didn’t spot them. Relief.

“Whew, this should get us to the back, at least.”

“Mm, then we’ve just gotta find a way *out*.”

They headed farther in, searching for the boss room.

Clear got them all the way to the boss room without trouble. Now for the hard part.

“Wh-what’s the plan? We made it here, but...”

“Yeah, and we’ve just gotta do what we can.”

“True...”

“C’m on, head up. We can do all the prep we like outside the door, right?”

“Hmm? Oh, right.”

They normally tackled dungeons as support for DPS players.

Since it took ages of prep for them to do any damage, they usually didn't even try.

But this time, they had no choice.

“No clue what we're up against, but time we taught it how scary we can be with enough prep time.”

“...Yeah. Okay. I get that. I'm not who I was in the fourth event, either.”

They prepared items that took time to create and skills that took time to activate, only opening the door once they were well and truly ready.

Inside was an open room, the floor a whole desert of sand. At the very back was a stone throne, and before it stood the boss, decked out in a red cape and gold armor and holding a spear far grander than any of the soldiers outside—truly, the sand king.

As they stepped in, the king slammed the butt of his spear, despite Clear's skill. An army of sand soldiers emerged from the dunes.

“Well, he's got an army, but we've got a castle! Installation: One Night Fort!”

At Marx's cry, walls rose up around them, forming a fortress. He threw out skill after skill, generating the vine and rock barricades they'd used against the devils outside. As he worked, Iz busied herself with placing items and cannons around the fortress itself.

“Normally, all we need is Maple's Machine God, but these finally come in handy!”

“Now our soldiers. Remote Installation: Water Army. Remote Installation: Flower Cavalry.”

These skills classified as traps, so the soldiers would react only if the monsters got close, and they were a single-use, short-duration summon—but if they and the sand soldiers took each other out, that put them back at square one.

“Defenses are my thing, so the boss is all yours.”

“I've got it. Enjoy some artillery fire!”

Iz had Fey strengthen cannons and cannonballs alike and used Recycle on the balls. This would make it easy for them to reach the back of the boss room, then explode multiple times—not your average artillery barrage.

“Fire in the hole!”

Every cannon in the fortress roared and the projectiles' aim was true. Explosive fire covered the throne.

“Yikes... A-are you really a crafter?”

“Oh, but I am. I've just acquired a few offensive skills.”

“A few...?!”

“No time to chat—that boss still has plenty left in him.”

“...Well, he is a boss. Still...”

“Yes, we’re ready for him.”

Iz pulled still more cannons and catapults (loaded with bombs) out of her inventory, and Marx kept laying down more traps, pushing the sand soldiers back. The bombs demolished the soldiers’ front lines, advancing their own and giving Marx room to drop more traps.

“Okay...let’s close in.”

“I’m ready.”

“Swap!”

This was a skill with a very long cooldown—it made two traps trade positions. As that cooldown length implied, this was beyond useful.

They’d pushed the soldiers back by their king and placed a trap near them. Then he swapped that with the obvious choice.

“Oh, this close, I can’t miss.”

Namely, the One Night Fort. This left them with a row of cannons pointed right at the king and a ton of rolling bombs ready to drop the moment they got in range.

The previous traps and the fort itself cut off the king from his armies, and Iz was pulling still more bombs out of her inventories to throw at him.

“I can at least keep him immobilized...”

Commander-type bosses didn’t have many options when the souped-up fortress was this close. Marx soon had all four of the king’s limbs trussed, but still the monster tried to thrust his spear—only to find himself enveloped in explosions that scorched the very ceiling—and he crumbled to sand, vanishing.

“That was easier than I thought.”

“You...Maple Tree members are just so weird. Ooh, a medal.”

“Interesting, I got one, too. That means we can probably devote the rest of the day to regrouping and camp creation.”

“Oh, right. Gotta regroup...”

At that point, they were surrounded by light and sent back to the main map. But that meant they’d be surrounded by monsters again. They braced for combat—but no horde lunged at them.

Instead, they found Mii wielding two massive fireballs, Misery focusing on healing, and Chrome out front, surrounded by monsters.

“Oh, they *are* here! ’Sup, Iz.”

“Marx as well. Glad to see you.”

“Yeah, sure. A lot happened, but it turned out okay? I guess.”

“And that led to you getting a medal?”

“I got the ping, too,” Chrome said. “You worked together?”

“We made a good team.”

“Mm-hmm...we did.”

It was a happy stroke of luck all around. But the extra medal made everyone grin.

These three had been tracking the Signal Charms, and they'd waited for Marx at the spot where he disappeared.

“Glad you tagged along, Chrome. Should make it easier for us to get to Maple.”

Here, Chrome explained his reason for joining Mii. That was enough to convince Iz they should stick together for now. It never hurt to have numbers on their side.

“Hate to hitch a ride for free—have some potions. Specially made. Mii, you know the ones.”

“Oh, that will help. If we find Shin, I'll take you back to Maple. That much is easily done.”

“Great, thanks.”

“...Um, hate to burst your bubble, but I think Shin's Signal Charm just vanished.”

“What? I doubt he'd go down that easily...”

Mii had faith in Shin's skills. And there was another reason why the charm would vanish.

“Maybe...he's in a dungeon?” Marx suggested.

He'd been through the same thing himself a moment before. And his prediction proved accurate.

“Well, this is less than ideal.”

“Yeah, I did not expect that large a magic circle.”

Shin and Kasumi were discussing their current situation. The latter had been searching for Maple Tree members on the back of her Supergiant white snake—so anyone who knew the drill would soon recognize her. But instead of her own guild members, she'd been approached by Shin.

Then the entire forest had been enveloped in gale-force winds, transporting *all* the players within to this dungeon.

The two of them had both received a medal notification a moment before—and this turn of events gave them a decent idea how those medals had been secured.

“No clue what triggered that transport, but at least this place is large enough to ride Haku around.”

“Yeah...but I can also hear screaming. We should be cautious.”

Kasumi kept her snake close by so it could pitch in, moving through the forest dungeon. It was every bit as dark as the main map, creepy in a way that made them fearful of ambushes. For a while, they heard only distant screams...then there was a rumble from below, and

they braced themselves.

“...! Kasumi!”

“Yep, here it comes! Mind’s Eye!”

Kasumi used a skill that let her predict a foe’s attack range and saw the entire area covered in a red hit box.

“Shin! In here!”

“R-right!”

Realizing it was too late for evasive maneuvers, Kasumi had Haku coil around them. She hardened its scales—

Just in time. There was a loud clang. Their heads snapped up in time to see a giant centipede pass overhead, its trajectory deflected upward by Haku’s flank. The ground shook again, and the damage box vanished from Kasumi’s vision. They breathed a sigh of relief.



“Ugh, that carapace looked tough. How do we fight something like that?”

“Those screams are likely other players getting tossed around. Probably not meant to be fought by one or two players at a time.”

“Yeah, what a headache.”

“But if we don’t beat it, we’re stuck in here, and that’s not gonna work long-term.”

“Right. Okay, let’s go kill a bug. Wen, Awaken. Splinter Sword.”

Shin called out to his pet hawk and turned his blade to into cluster of hovering shards. The sheer quantity of these was far greater than what Kasumi had seen in the fourth event, and if he could control them all at will, it would give him considerable offensive power.

“You up the quantity?”

“Yep, and Wen’s pretty focused on number of hits, too. I might even give your Sally a run for her money.”

“I could see her just dodging through it without batting an eye...”

“So can I. Still, I wanna give it a shot someday.”

“Stop by the guild home, then. Frederica does it all the time.”

“Might just do that. If I can hit Sally, I’ll have some major bragging rights! Oh, incoming.”

“Seems like.”

Kasumi had Haku unfurl and called out her Armored Arms, ready to throw down. The red overlay came back at them.

“Just ahead!” she cried.

“Okay. Wen, Wind God.”

Shin unleashed his splinters and his pet’s wind blades. They peppered the centipede’s head and torso, slicing it up but not slowing it down.

“Tch, one tough customer!”

“Haku!”

Trying not to let it dive again, she had Haku hit it from the side, taking a big bite and hoisting it up. Meanwhile, she leaped onto the giant bug and raised her katana.

“Second Blade: Ironslicer!”

Her sword swung straight down, cut through the centipede’s defenses like butter, split the shell, and dug into the flesh below. A solid hit. Meanwhile, Haku’s jaws chewed right through it, splitting the head from the torso.

“Wow, that snake is mad strong.”

“My trusted partner.”

Kasumi jumped down, rejoining Shin—and both halves of the monster’s body thrashed wildly, escaping Haku’s grasp and burrowing

again.

“I thought it was dying awfully quick, but is the real fight just beginning?”

“Probably. Mind’s Eye ran out. Shin, don’t let your guard down.”

If they focused on the source of the rumbles, they could feel another foe approaching. Their hunch was right on the money: Two centipedes launched themselves from the soil. The only difference was that the new one was smaller. And the first had regenerated itself.

“Kasumi!”

“Yup!”

Needing no further words, each took one bug, launching an attack.

“You’re staying put! Wen, Wind Cage!”

“Haku, grab it again!”

Kasumi and her extra arms all took a mighty swing, once again slicing it open. Shin and Wen trapped his bug in the air, where it was buffeted by dozens of blades.

“Durability’s dropping.”

“But I think they’re getting faster.”

“It’s splitting again. And looks like whenever it does, there’s a chance of it escaping.”

Haku’s constraints and Wen’s Wind Cage proved no use. The centipedes escaped and attacked once more. Each time they had twice as many—they were up to sixteen now. When it had been eight, one slipped through their offense and hit Kasumi, so fending off this many was a tall order.

“They’re shrinking but with no loss to DPS.”

“But they *are* losing HP. That makes them my fodder! Kasumi, you finish off anything that gets past me.”

“On it.”

As they talked, the next wave came, attacking from every direction.

“Sixteen is nothing!”

Wen’s Wind God unleashed a flurry of wind blades that sliced all the centipedes in kind, and if any survived that, a storm of flying blades ran them through.

“That HP loss seals your doom!”

Not one made it through Shin’s barrage. Without Kasumi needing to lift a finger, they cleared the thirty-two- and sixty-four-centipede waves.

“Without an AOE, this would be pure hell.”

“We got one hundred and twenty-eight next?”

“Not sure, but I still outnumber them.”

The ground started shaking, far harder than it had before, and

mandibles emerged before them. They belonged to a centipede far larger than the first one.

This wasn't what they had expected at all. Caught off guard, Shin reacted too late, but Kasumi met the unpleasant surprise with force.

"Purple Phantom Blade!"

She unleashed a furious combo so intense that it pushed the lunging monster back. The arms flanking her joined in, swinging faster than ever before. Cracks appeared in the bug's shell from head to tail.

As the skill wound down, a bunch of katanas appeared in the air around the centipede, all stabbing home as one. The sheer force of this was too much for the boss, and it vanished in a burst of light.

"Hmm, makes sense. Doubling again would have been three digits, so it went the other way. Meanwhile...you got small."

"Shut up. Stare and I'll cut you."

Kasumi had gone with her strongest skill. But it came with a serious downside: She *shrank*. For that reason, she did her best to avoid using it, but when the situation demanded it, she didn't hesitate.

"Haku, lemme on. Ugh, too high!"

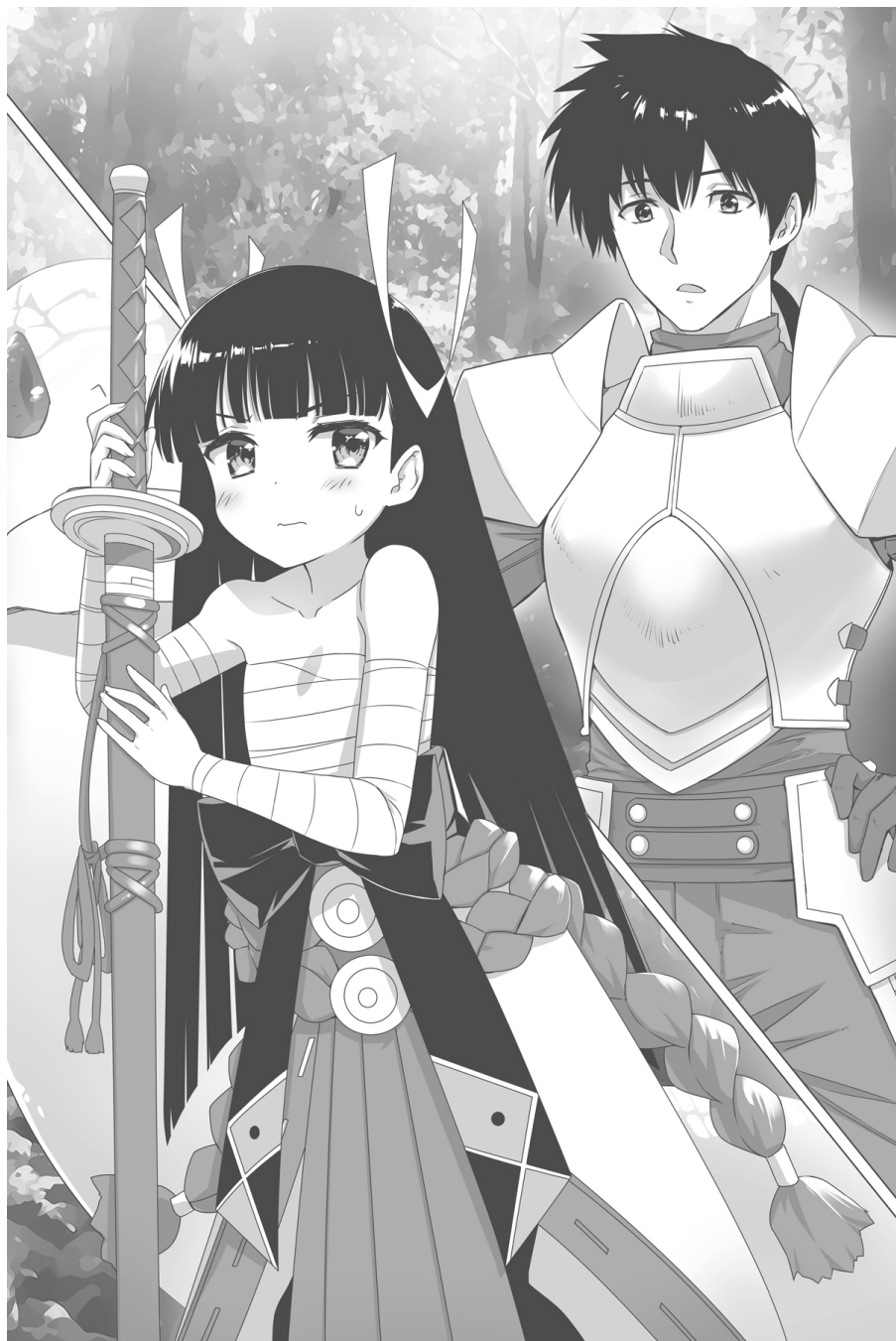
"Should I help?"

"I'll be back to normal soon enough. Don't treat me like a child!"

"Ha-ha-ha, seriously, your guild finds the most fascinating skills."

Both learned they'd acquired a medal, and their bodies were wreathed in light.

"I can't fight until I'm full-size again."



“Shouldn’t be an issue. Mii’s headed our way, and with your snake, we can handle most monsters.”

Kasumi finally managed to haul herself onto Haku, and they headed back out across the map.



The second day’s twist had eliminated a whole slew of players.

They gathered on the forums, discussing what difficulty they’d tackled and what bosses had killed them.

354 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Splitting us up was too big a shock.

I was sure we were only solo for the prelims.

355 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

This.

Solo was rough on normal difficulty.

Even with pets.

356 Name: Anonymous Mage

I was downed before I found anyone.

Sure wish I’d snagged myself a flying pet.

357 Name: Anonymous Archer

Mounts are pretty damn rare.

And if you’d hit the prelims before leveling it, you’d be done.

That’s why I gave up looking.

358 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

If normal was that bad, what’s the highest difficulty like?

359 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Pure hell.

360 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Oh, were you there?

Give us deets.

361 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Figured it was worth a shot, since I qualified, but man.

There were just insanely powerful devils everywhere.

362 Name: Anonymous Mage
Yiiikes.
The map was full of Maples?

363 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
Honestly, not that far off.
I did well in the prelims, so I thought I could handle it...
But the teleport did me dirty.

364 Name: Anonymous Archer
It might've turned out differently if they at least dropped you near a player you could team with.
Someone to watch your six would have been huge.

365 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
Exactly.
Even the trash mobs were rough!
One mistake and I crumpled.

366 Name: Anonymous Archer
I saw Pain's party fighting day one.
They were just marching around looking for dungeons, really rubbed it in.
Top difficulty is definitely meant for *those* people.

367 Name: Anonymous Spear Master
Sounds like a lot.
Glad I didn't qualify.

368 Name: Anonymous Mage
I kinda wish I had.
Wouldn't mind being stomped by mass-produced Maples.
...Just me?

369 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
You'd die before you found a devil.
There were sounds of combat and monster footsteps everywhere—
nothing was safe.
Even monsters in the skies.

370 Name: Anonymous Archer
And something regularly exploding up above.
Maybe players riding flying pets, shooting things down.

371 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
Yeah, I saw that, too.

Repeating in the same spot, so might have been a dungeon trap.

372 Name: Anonymous Mage

Monsters on the field.

Traps in the dungeons.

Truly hell on earth.

373 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Thanks for filling us in!

Little did they know the explosions in question had been Maple blowing herself up as a signal for her scattered party. Looking forward to hearing about the third day, the forum discussion turned to dungeons they'd seen.



While fights were happening elsewhere, Maple and Mai were enjoying a peaceful tea party on Syrup's back.

"Wow, another medal, Mai!"

"Yeah. Are they all clearing dungeons alone?"

"Hmm, well, nobody's coming here. I feel like we're hard to miss..."

Maple had decided not to waste her weapons, so she'd switched to her green dress and used Poltergeist to snag some laser beams she'd fired skyward.

That meant they now had big columns of light waving around them, and this could be seen for miles.

"Oh, another monster incoming!"

Since these were lasers, waving them around basically made them light swords. Devils that came at them wound up tail-spinning to the ground below with their wings burned off. That's where Mai came in. She had a pile of iron balls under the table (on Syrup's back), and she'd pick one up, send it flying with a snap of her wrist, and make the devil's head pop like a balloon.

"Nice pitching!"

"Th-thank you."

"Hngg, I put this table out 'cause I figured the others would catch up soon. They might have been sent really far away!"

"But we know they're all still playing. Everyone's strong, so I'm sure they'll get here eventually."

"Not like we can find them! Want some more tea?"

"Yes, please."

Hell might reign below, but up here, the tea party was going

swimmingly.

While Maple was in the relative safety of the sky, down below, it was nigh impossible to find anywhere free of monsters. Arguably, players were safer inside a dungeon.

Two Maple Tree members—Kanade and Yui—had lucked into each other and were using their small statures to hide in the hollow of a tree. But Kanade alone was ill-equipped to keep Yui safe, and there were monsters closing in on the hollow.

“Whew, glad you showed up. We might not have made it much longer on our own.”

“Suuure. But truth is, I was in trouble myself.”

Drag was standing outside the hollow. He generally fought with Frederica backing him up, and without support, he struggled to unleash his full potential.

“Just a little give-and-take. Get us through this and we can go our separate ways.”

“Yeah, well, Frederica’s headed this way, and she’s got Sally with her somehow.”

“You’re in touch?”

“More or less.”

“Then we just need to hold on a bit longer. If Sally’s with us, we should make it to Maple.”

They weren’t that far from where the laser beams were. They just had to survive this wave.

“Holy Armor. Holy Enchant.”

Kanade’s spells made Drag’s armor and weapon glow. That would reduce incoming damage and increase the damage he dealt.

“Sou’s got more damage-reduction spells, so fight how you please,” Kanade said. He called out his pet and made it look like him.

“Ha! Bet that comes in handy. Earth, Quake.”

Drag’s golem pounded both hands into the ground, and violent tremors spread out in all directions. This did nothing to flying enemies, but it stopped the zombies around them in their tracks.

“Ground Wave!”

Drag’s next skill made the ground itself ripple, rising high and forcing the horde back. All Drag’s attacks had a knockback effect, so this sent them flying. Not only was he good at knocking foes off-balance, but he also had a ton of ways to keep them from closing in at all. Since any and all attacks he did would put distance between them, getting close enough to attack wasn’t easy.

“Wow! If I could do stuff like that, fighting would be so much easier!”

“We all got strengths and weaknesses. You just gotta wait for the moment to bust out yours.”

“Right!”

“Oh, Defensive Barrier.”

“Nice guard! You’re as good as Frederica!”

“...You keep talking like that, I won’t be helping you again,” Frederica said as she pushed through the underbrush.

“Hngg?! Here already? What a relief! Sooner than I expected.”

“I know I *just* said I’m not helping, but...Multi-Barrier.”

Seeing Frederica move to back up Drag, Sally jogged over to Kanade and Yui.

“There you are. Glad you’re safe.”

“We were almost to Maple when the monsters caught up.”

“We tried fighting with Drag, but I almost went down... Oh! Sally, you’ve got to keep him safe!”

Frederica’s assistance was helpful, but it was still two against a lot, so Yui looked very worried. Especially since she’d ended up relying on him to keep her safe.

“Don’t worry—Frederica’s not the only one with me.”

“Oh?”

“Range Expansion! Holy Condemnation!”

“Whirlwind Slicer!”

Voices could be heard from beyond Drag’s earthen wall...and a flash lit up the field. They could hear the distinctive shattering sound of monsters dying.

“He’s even stronger now—and this is without his pet in play. Real glad this event has no PvP.”

“Pain and Dread? Impressive backup.”

The remaining Order leaders had cleared up the mob. They sheathed their weapons and joined Drag and Frederica.

“Yeah, no use,” she said. “The rest of the party ain’t answering. That robs us of the tank and our buff and debuffer... Guess they had bad luck with the teleport.”

“Ah. How’s our base?” Pain asked.

Frederica just shook her head. They’d been camping at the edge of the map, and that was now overrun with powerful foes.

“We’ll have to find a new place? Ugh.”

“No use gripin’. Can’t explore systematically without a base to operate from.”

Hearing this, Sally looked thoughtful...then moved over to them.

“Uh, if you have a moment, I’ve got a proposition for ya,” she said and then began to explain.



“What do you think? I found these in a seventh-stratum shop!”

“They’re great! I’ll have to tell Yui about them later!”

“Heh-heh! I’ve got loads more— Wait, something’s coming!”

Maple spotted something flying out of the darkness and took aim, preparing to scorch it with her lasers. Mai hefted an iron ball, facing the same way.

“Hold on, is that...?”

Maple squinted. It wasn’t a monster—it was Ignis. And riding on its back were members of Flame Empire, the Order of the Holy Sword, and the rest of Maple Tree.

“We meet again, Maple. Faster than I anticipated.”

“Mii! You found everyone? Even Pain?! What’s going on?!”

“Sally and I had the same idea,” Pain said. “I was surprised we proposed it at the same time, though.”

“True.”

Specifically, they’d suggested the three guilds share a camp. Maple Tree’s cave was at the center of the map, and the monsters hadn’t overrun it yet.

And in return for letting them use it, the others would help defend.

“Oh! I like it! The more the merrier! And we should be able to handle *any* hordes if we’re fighting together.”

Maple’s grin settled things. The rest of her guild hopped onto Syrup, and she led the way to their base.

“Hmm, Sally, we’re close, right?”

“Um, those mountains haven’t moved, so it should be at the base here.”

Maple took Syrup straight down into a landing. They searched the area for a bit and soon found their sign, with a familiar-looking cave behind it.

“Whew, good! Let’s hit up the camp again, then go explore!”

“But it took so much time finding one another that setup alone might push us into tough-monster time.”

It seemed best to get the setup over with. They all headed into the cave. Resetting all the traps was the most time-consuming part, so they did that as they went.

“Yikes...these are based on nothing but lethality...”

“Marx, can you add your traps in anywhere?”

“Please do. Might be a good idea to have one route where we won’t accidentally set anything off as we leave. Don’t want anyone getting eliminated from a false step.”

Maple always had Martyr’s Devotion going, so Maple Tree

members could wade through poison without problem, but that wasn't the case for the other guilds' members.

For that reason, they had Marx join in the trap setup as they steadily worked their way to the back of the cave. With eight extra members, they had to change up how the space was used.

"I'll just make quick work of it! Gimme a hand? And I mean everyone."

Iz started barking orders, and the living area was swiftly remodeled. With their traps ready to go and far more people, this didn't take as long as it had before.



"Okay, almost time to let out the second day's tough enemies!"

"That forced teleport really thinned the player base. As for the rest...let's send more trials their way!"

"The players are still pretty scattered...mm? Multiple parties clustered up...?"

"Hmm? Where?"

"The player-made super-lethal dungeon."

"Maple Tree, huh? Ugh, they all made it back...with company?"

They pored over player locations, wondering what was up, and soon saw a bunch of familiar names.

"Why...? How?"

"There's more of them?! And they're all together?!"

"Sending any monsters into that place is just mean. To the monsters."

"But we can't exactly call them off..."

Less than half an hour remained until they were unleashed. Even if they adjusted the stats, Marx had helped make the man-made dungeon even deadlier, and the monsters would naturally head to the players—where all three guilds were.

"Please try to leave...at least one of you..."

"At least get through the traps! Please!"

"And take out that whole party!"

"Ha-ha-ha, we can dream."

"Ha-ha-ha, true."

""""Ha-ha-ha-ha.""""

Hollow laughs echoed in the admin chamber.

They finished setting up their camp not long before the tough monsters were due to appear. They had to trim some space off the battle area, but Marx's traps made that zone better than ever.

"Oh, a screen? What are we watching?"

"This'll show us what's going on," Marx said, turning it on.

It was streaming footage from several locations around the ant nest-like dungeon.

"Wow! That's amazing!"

"Th-this way we can tell which types of traps should be reset and how strong the monsters are. For now..."

Leaving combat to Maple and the other guild members, he retreated to his partition.

The remodeled living area had a common area in the center and spaces for each guild leading off it. Marx had put the screen in that central room.

Since this was primarily Maple Tree's camp, their members were the ones making the most noise, but Frederica had spent enough time with them that she felt right at home.

"Now we wait, huh? Can't exactly go out clearing dungeons but can't relax, either."

"Well, since you're here, if anything gets through, pitch in."

"I know that, Sally! We've got the Flame Empress with us—ain't nothing gonna give us problems."

"Sally! Monsters incoming!"

Speak of the devils. Marx's screen showed the first intruders. These monsters were running around on four legs. They looked a bit like Maple's Atrocity form but with fewer legs and more eyes. Monster after monster poured into the entrance—a whole swarm of them—the sheer volume overwhelming the traps. The traps did thin the numbers a lot but couldn't get them all.

"Wow, they're actually getting through. These look stronger than last night's batch. Pain! Time to work!"

As Frederica yelled toward the Order's chambers, Mii emerged from Flame Empire's.

"I'll go out. Stay behind me."

"Mii, can you handle it alone?" Maple asked.

Mii shot her a confident grin.

"I run a big guild, you know. Shin might be a fighter, but Marx and Misery are mostly back-line support."

And if a swarm of monsters with decent endurance was coming at them, Mii was at her best out in front alone.

"If you're in trouble, I'll jump in whenever!"

"By all means. But don't fret. You won't need to."

As Mii spoke, Pain emerged, nodding.

"I'll join you. I swear my endeavors will make up for lending us your camp."

"Cool, cool. Then I'll power you up!"

This wasn't just Frederica. Marx, Misery, and Iz all stepped in, giving them as many buffs as possible. Auras and effects of all colors sparkled over them; they were ready.

"Shall we, Mii?"

"No holding back this time, Pain."

"Yes, with those numbers...better we take them out in a single blow."

They brought out Ignis and Ray respectively, moving to the front of the interception zone.

With pounding footsteps, the first of the monsters shot out of the passage.

The moment it spotted them, a black magic circle appeared before its eyes—readying some form of attack. But before it could finish casting, Mii and Pain struck.

"Ignis, Phoenix Ignition. Fire Unto Me."

"Ray, Light Flux, Total Mana Release."

Mii's body was wrapped in red fire, and flames shot across the ground. Pain's sword was aglow with pale light, and sparks audibly crackled as they ran along it.

"Funeral Pyre!"

"Palidragon's Lightsword!"

Just as a black light began to emerge from the monster's circles, an overwhelming surge of red and white filled the space. Mii's flames turned the entire ground to a damage zone, burning in all directions. Pain's light hit the devil-type monsters' weakness, and each beast it struck turned to ash.

The fire and light raced through the passage, sweeping up all remaining items and vanishing like a gale, leaving devastation in their wake.

"Oh. Not as strong as I'd expected from day two."

"The terrain helped. Here, we can rely on big moves that would otherwise leave us exposed."

"Wow! You're both amazing!"

"That's likely not the last of them. But with sixteen of us, it'll be easy enough to take shifts. Call our guild in whenever we're needed."

"Same for ours."

“Thanks!”

Maple was still gushing about how badass they were when Frederica came rushing back from the screen.

“Yo, Pain! You blew all Marx’s cameras away!”

The only image left on-screen was the one at the entrance.

“.....? Was there a range extension buff, too? Not used to that, sorry.”

“Mii...those take forever to set up.”

“Oh, uh...my bad.”

They’d have to venture out and put everything back up, traps included.

Chrome and Kasumi glanced at each other.

“Are all guild masters like this?”

“Not many are quite that OP. We just know a lot of them.”

Both glanced back at their own guild master and then headed out to help reset the traps before the next wave arrived.

Maple and Sally took Marx with them, fixing the items Pain’s and Mii’s power moves had busted up.

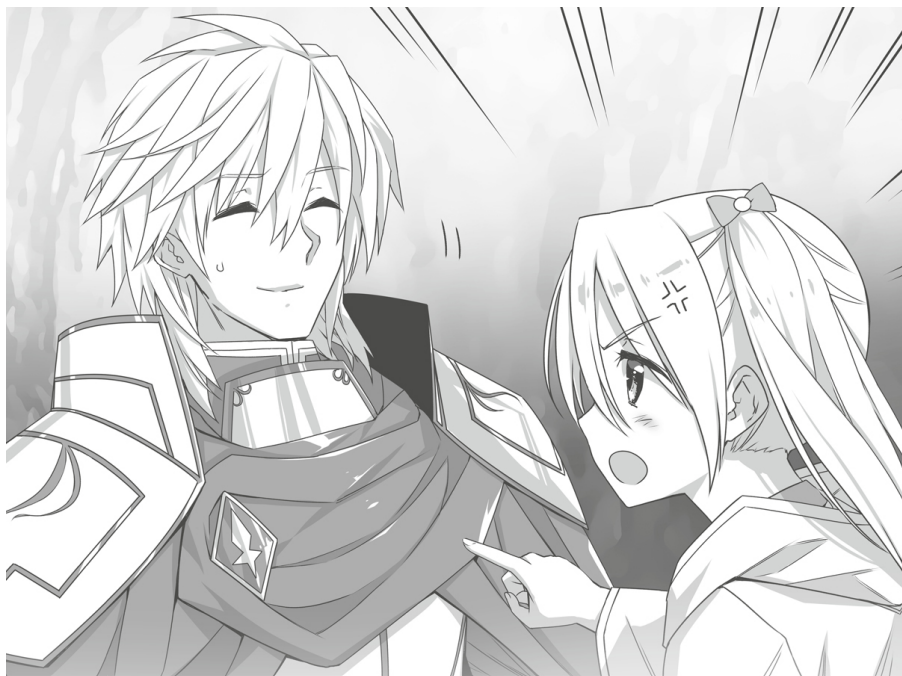
“Never imagined we’d be making a dungeon this intense...,” Marx muttered, placing another camera in the corner.

“Mm-hmm, I figured they’d both have boosted their damage, but that was worse than I’d expected.”

“It was amazing!”

“We might still have to fight them again, you know. Hard to just be happy for ’em.”

“O-oh. Fair.”



Both her rivals could do a lot more than they had in the fourth event. Maple clenched a fist, resolved to be ready when the time came.

“Sure, they were wildly buffed, but I promise we were just as shocked,” Marx said. “If Pain can do AOE’s at Mii’s level... Well, he’s never been the type to try and exploit a weakness.”

Flame Empire was also wary of the Order. Catching a glimpse of what their greatest rivals could do was a big boon to all three guilds assembled here.

And getting enough medals during this event would be instrumental in pulling a step ahead. Yet Flame Empire was already down to their four core members, and Shin was the only traditional frontline fighter. They might well be in the worst position here.

Pondering their options, Marx finished his work and headed back to the dungeon depths, lost in thought. The girls followed on his heels.

Some time had passed. After several waves, resetting the traps no longer seemed worth it, and they switched to taking down monsters as soon as they came in. The sixteen players in the cave all had at least one thing they were considered masters of in the game, so once they got the rotation going, they handled things easily enough.

For instance, when a monster poked its head out of the passage, Mai and Yui hit it with hammers, and if something made it past their swings or had a skill that let them survive it, Iz’s cannons and Frederica’s or Mii’s ranged attacks made quick work of them.

Once they’d realized they could hold the line pretty easily, Flame Empire and the Order gathered in the common space, talking.

“What’s going on?” Maple asked, joining them. She’d been checking for incoming attacks. Both guilds had been discussing the same idea: going out dungeon exploring before the night was over.

“The monsters tonight aren’t anything to be trifled with, but from what we’ve seen so far, we can handle them. Given the surprise teleport this morning, there’s a chance they’ll have another trick up their sleeves tomorrow.”

“Pain has a point. Nights may be more perilous than the day, but the second night versus the third day... Well, the latter may prove far worse.”

“I—I see...”

They ran the first- and second-largest guilds in the game, and both wanted as many medals as they could get. Once they’d tested the forces arrayed against them and deemed them a manageable threat, exploration was back on the table.

“Okay, I’m convinced! We can help with that!”

Pain and Mii both looked surprised. After a moment, they realized she didn't have an angle—she was genuinely just trying to help out her friends.

“Well, we could certainly use frontline assistance. And it seems like medals are distributed to everyone involved, so there's a benefit to your team, too.”

“I'd suggest talking to the other members of your guild about the risk involved. I'm grateful for the offer, but we're already borrowing your camp.”

But if Maple Tree was offering help, they'd gladly take it. They started discussing provisional strategies for these expeditions, and Maple went to consult her guildmates.

“Could work. They've got a point about day-three surprises. And we are handling these monsters just fine.”

“I'd certainly welcome more medals.”

““““We'll do whatever it takes!””””

“I'm in, as long as we're back here by morning.”

“Same. Kasumi and Iz each nabbed us medals, but I didn't actually do any exploring myself.”

“I vote we try to reach our target sooner rather than later. We may not have the luxury tomorrow.”

With everyone on board, they decided to split the three guilds up into several parties and go explore.

“I've got a map with likely dungeon locations marked on it. Lemme just share.”

“Oh...you're on the ball, Sally. Fork it over!”

“Gimme a sec, geez.”

Sally sent everyone a copy of the map she'd made during the prelims. This would be a big help in determining which way to go.

“Looks like...places with unique landmarks are clustered around the edges. We were checking this section.”

“Probably plays into their plans for day two and on. The edge of the map has tougher foes, so if we're gonna venture out there, now is probably the best time.”

With additional information from the other guilds and careful consideration of risk and reward, they wound up with four teams of four to hit as many places as they could while still keeping the teams balanced. Each party had at least one member from all three guilds in it, and each was assigned a cardinal direction in their search for dungeons.

Mobility, durability, and offensive power—each party had their strengths. It was time to leave the camp behind.

A party composed of Dread, Marx, Mai, and Yui headed east. They

were riding Tsukimi and Yukimi, moving swiftly across the map.

“Wow, these bears are speedy.”

“Yeah, even if we do run into monsters, we might be able to just get away...”

Even as he spoke, one of the four-legged monsters from the first wave appeared up ahead. Even Clear’s skill couldn’t make them completely invisible, which explained why it came charging right at them.

““Power Share! Bright Star!””

Since the twins were stronger than the bears, sharing their STR stat boosted Tsukimi’s and Yukimi’s DPS a lot. The second skill fired a ball of light that did a ton of damage.

Both hit the incoming monster and staggered it. The bears raced past on either side. As they did, the twins swung their hammers. They landed direct hits and turned the monster into a spray of light.

“Talk about a sideswipe.”

“Downright unnerving seeing it from this close up.”

This party’s core strategy was to smoothly get the twins in range and let them wreak havoc. With the bears here, they had speed on their side, and Marx’s traps gave them a reliable way of getting out of Dodge when needed.

Checking Sally’s map occasionally, they had a rough idea where the marked locations were.

“The actual terrain hasn’t changed. Sally said it should be right around...there!”

The sky was dark and starless, yet the pond before it was clearly reflecting a moon. Looking up, there was nothing above—an uncanny sight that hinted at something unusual.

“Shall we?”

“Yeah, don’t want monsters showing up while we gape at it. And I heard you do better inside the dungeons.”

“Yeah, Clear’s powers don’t really work on the monsters out here.”

“Then let’s dive on in. If it really *is* a dungeon.”

“Okay! Tsukimi!”

The twins had their bears move to the edge of the pond.

“Let’s try the center of the pond.”

“Do we...need a boat?”

Tsukimi and Yukimi could swim, so that wasn’t necessary. They stepped forward—and their paws didn’t sink, just rested on the surface. They were walking on water.

“That’s...a good sign.”

They kept going. Once they reached the moon in the center, light appeared around them.

“Got one! Try not to die.”

“Mm-hmm.”

““Okay!””

The party was in high spirits when the light swallowed them and whisked them away to the dungeon.

They found themselves on soaking-wet ground, moisture beading on the walls. Everything was damp. The circular space looked like a starting zone.

There was only one way forward, so they took it.

“Let’s do this.”

“Okay, Clear, Transparency.”

“Now they can’t see us?”

“Yeah. But it doesn’t work on every monster, so we might still get targeted.”

“If this were PvP, even if I knew it was coming, I would probably be outta luck.”

“...Guess we’ll have to find out.”

They headed in, moving cautiously. A yard-long eel came flying through the air toward them, surrounded by water. It left a trail of visible moisture in its path, and the trail was crackling, white sparks flying.

“Mai!”

“Yup!”

The twins took a step forward, each raising their hammers.

When they swung, their hammers slammed it hard into the ground. A spray of electricity arced away as the eel burst into light.

“Spectacular assassination.”

“Well worth Transparency.”

Attacking made them visible, so when Marx had been with Iz, remaining undetected had been their only option. With Mai and Yui, the skill had a very different application. For the monster, it must’ve been like invisible death blows coming out of thin air. And since it took only one hit, the monster never saw them.

“Not an approach our guild could take.”

“The skill itself is all about ambushes...”

““Um, they can see us now, so if you could cast it again...””

“The mobs might show up in the boss fight, so if we spot anything new, we should take it down.”

Whether Mai’s and Yui’s blows were fatal or not had a big impact on their strategy. But this game didn’t have many trash mobs that could survive their attacks.

Their dungeon conquest was off to a good start.

Marx reapplied Transparency and then used a trapper skill that

generated a protective wall if anyone attacked either twin.

“Like that electricity, there may be attacks that can hurt you even if they don’t see you.”

“And we don’t have your usual protections—Maple’s Martyr’s Devotion, I think it’s called? That means we can’t just bulldoze here. Gotta predict and dodge.”

And if that failed, Marx’s protective wall was their last resort.

Mai and Yui had been practicing aiming their attacks in case they wound up paired with someone other than Maple, so this was a good opportunity to put those skills to use.

“Let’s keep this up the whole way through!”

“We have to be very careful, then, Yui.”

Eager to press forward, they moved on and found plenty of fish swimming through the air besides the electric eels. After a number of those encounters, they emerged into a bigger room filled with fish leaving streams of electrified water in their wake.

Touch any of that or attack any fish, and every monster in the room would turn and charge right at them.

“Wh-what do we do? We can’t beat all these!”

The twins specialized in obliterating lone single targets. They had some AOE’s that could work on small crowds but were a poor match for this quantity and for anything that came in waves.

“I’d love to just slip past, but that looks tricky,” Marx muttered.

“All righty, then. Umbra, Awaken.”

At Dread’s call, a black-maned wolf emerged.

“Marx ain’t the only one who knows how to avoid a fight.”

Dread instructed them to run straight across the room the moment he used his skill. The twins climbed onto their bears and were ready to go.

“Okay. Umbra, Shadow World.”

On his command, darkness spread from their feet, and they slipped into the ground itself. They almost froze in shock, but everyone remembered his words in time and broke into a run straight ahead. The fish-filled room was still visible through the ground above their heads. As they ran, they could feel themselves being pushed upward, the transparent ground getting closer. Time almost ran out before they reached the other side but they successfully cleared the room without alerting any mobs.

“Ha-ha, that would get you right past any of my traps. I feel like you’re the one who’d leave me in the dust.”

“...Guess we’ll have to find out one day.”

Marx was reeling from this glimpse of the Order’s newfound strengths, but the twins were just astonished by the skill itself.

“Wow! That skill seems so useful!”

“You got us through! Thanks so much!”

“No problem. I’ll be counting on your DPS in the boss fight. Still...”

The twin’s excitement was infectious. A real different vibe from the hard-core gamer company he usually kept. Dread scratched his head.

“I guess that is very Maple Tree...”

“Yeah...I’m right with you there.”

One look at the gleam in the girls’ eyes was enough to convince them both that playing the game their way might have its merits.

Clear’s and Umbra’s avoidance abilities, plus Mai’s and Yui’s knack for one-shotting their way out of a jam, meant nothing in this dungeon gave them any real trouble. They were soon outside the boss room.

“Marx, you done prepping?”

“Mm-hmm, good to go.”

““So are we!””

“Then I’ll open her up.”

Dread led the way in. There was a large ball of water floating at the back, and inside was a giant catfish—some ten yards long—electricity crackling along the length of its mighty whiskers.

This dungeon’s boss was an electric catfish.

As the HP bar appeared over its head, the water around it rippled and sent multiple balls of water flying toward the party. These balls stopped and hovered at random intervals, but as the boss’s whiskers took on a greater charge, sparks began coursing through the watery spheres, too.

“Remote Installation: Earth Wall.”

Figuring this was bad news, Marx threw up some barriers between them and the balls. A moment later, there was a crack, and a massive lightning bolt arced across the orbs of water. It was gone as soon as it had appeared.

“No biggie. I’ll make an opening. You know how you fight with Sally?”

““Yep! We’re good to go!””

Like Sally, Dread was a speed fighter—he even used the same weapons. That made it easy for the twins to follow his lead. They’d done more training with Sally than any other player. They could spot the similarities readily enough.

“Umbra, Shadow Pack!”

As Dread raced forward, several wolves leaped out of his shadow, running out ahead and hurling themselves at the floating catfish. But before they could damage the boss itself, they made contact with the

water around it, and the electricity coursing through it vaporized them. This electrified sphere both let the boss swim and served as a barrier against incoming physical attacks.

“Gimme a break...we gotta fight with magic?”

If Dread got too close, he'd take damage himself. He had a skill that would let him survive with 1 HP, so he *could* give it a try, but the risk wasn't worth the return.

Dread threw out some spells to keep the aggro on him. The nature of this boss played against the twins' strengths. They'd need a new strategy. For lack of better options, he circled the boss, turning it away from Mai and Yui, but halfway around, something hit the catfish's belly with a boom as loud as any thunder.

The boss staggered sideways, and whatever hit it fell to the ground with a thud that shook the very room. Astounded, Dread turned to look and saw Mai tossing something into the air like a ball. A moment later, Yui's hammer swung through as if it was batting practice. Marx was next to them, visibly flinching.

There was a loud crack. Something flew away from them—

It was the in-game mystery-material mixture that had finally (as of last night) reached the hardness level required to withstand the twins' hammer blows.

The second ball moved at speeds no mere throw could ever achieve, striking the catfish right in the face so hard, it went limp and fell to the ground, water and all.

“Dread, now!”

“Take it away!”

“Talk about power moves... Septuple Slash! Umbra, Shadow Pack!”

Since the whiskers weren't visibly electrified, Dread gave it a shot and attacked. Figuring numbers would help, he brought in the wolves and used his highest hit-count combo, racking up the damage. Mid-combo, the whiskers became noticeably wounded. The boss itself was still not down, but Dread figured this would nerf the electric attacks a fair bit. Sparks started flying off the whole of the body, so he leaped back out of range.

“Uh-oh... Even on their bears, they won't make it.”

The fish hadn't stayed down for long, and they'd been setting up another batting round, so there was no way they could escape the boss's AOE if it targeted them. Dread did his best to keep the monster catfish focused on him, yelling, “Give it one more!”

““Okay!””

To avoid any risk of their strike hitting him, Dread put himself on the far side of the boss and focused on dodging its electric attacks. Unlike Sally, he could take a hit or two without dying and had some

skills that reduced damage taken—meanwhile, Marx was still throwing out walls. This let him buy time until it was downed again.



“Still, this is real touch and go. Umbra, Shadow Wall.”

Spying another attack incoming, he minimized the damage. And when bolts were too large to dodge, he made use of Umbra’s skills.

Between the game’s skills and his own gaming ability, he bought enough time for the batting attack to down the boss again.

““We’ll join you for this round!””

They hopped on their bears to close the gap.

““Double Strike!””

They vaulted off their pets. Where the batting was a weird application of their core stats, this was a proper attack skill, and it did far more damage.

And since the twins had sacrificed everything else for sheer offense, they were every bit as OP as Mii and Pain. In their hands, even a basic attack skill anyone could acquire was a one-hit KO.

But the catfish clung to life with only a few shreds of HP left, and the sparks flying were brighter than ever before. Given how strong the twins’ blow had been, this tenacity was downright unnatural, and Dread figured a counter was coming. He turned to run.

““It’s still alive?!””

“Move! It’s a trick!”

They recovered in time to jump aboard their bears, following Dread back toward Marx.

Glancing over their shoulders, they saw the arcing sparks reach their zenith, and pillars of lightning scorched the ceiling, gouging the earth and chasing after them.

“Remote Installation: Earth Wall. Remote Installation: Barrier. Remote Installation: Rampart.”

Marx threw up three walls behind them, trying to slow down the lightning. They just barely made it to him, and there he threw up the fortress he’d used when teamed with Iz.

“Installation: One Night Fort! Urgh, I still can’t cancel it out?!”

“How long we got?”

“At this rate...thirty seconds!”

Outside the fortress walls was nothing but the blinding white light of an electrical charge. It was impossible to tell what was happening beyond. But they couldn’t just wait here to die.

“All right, one last hit. If we’re gonna fry anyway, might as well try. What a pain in the butt.”

With no better options, Dread raced out of the fortress into the thick of the lightning storm.

“Superspeed, Top Speed, Godspeed! Umbra, Shadow Dive!”

Piling on all the speed buffs he could, he used his wolf’s skill to dive into his shadow. It lasted only a moment, but with this much

speed stacked on him, he was through the massive lightning in an instant.

Beyond lay the giant catfish. It was emitting ridiculous amounts of lightning, but there was no more need to race through it—Dread was already casting an earth magic spell to shoot a stone bullet.

“Whew... Thank god it ain’t that thick.”

The bullet scored a clean hit, piercing the catfish’s brow and stealing the last of its HP.

“Mm, glad that worked.”

“Are you still with us, Dread?”

“Mm-hmm, yeah, I’m good. No problemo.”

With the fight done, everyone scored a medal. Mai and Yui were hopping with joy. Dread mostly hoped the next dungeon would be a little easier on them.

The party with Pain, Misery, Iz, and Kanade had headed west. Naturally, this lineup meant they were flying on Ray’s back.

“Looks like Dread’s team cleared a dungeon.”

“Fast work. Mai and Yui must have done their part.”

This party had set their sights on some floating islands. Many of them were just decorative, beyond the map’s boundaries, but there was one floating just within range.

“Weird that it’s just one, so I bet there’s something there.”

“Yeah. Just... Well, they’re waiting for us.”

Since their destination sat right on the border of the map, the air here was full of the powerful foes that were invading from the edges. As predicted, a flock of bat-like monsters was flying toward them—and judging by the horns on their heads, they were more devils.

“We’ve fought these below. They summon minions. What’re we thinking?”

“We’re close to the island. If we can make them flinch, we should slip through.”

“Right. Then let’s make that happen. Sou, you’re up. Sleeping Bubbles. Paralyze Shout.”

An electric-like effect shot from a book, along with a slew of rainbow bubbles. If Kanade knew a skill, Sou had access to it. Not every foe was affected, but plenty were put to sleep or paralyzed and hurtled toward the ground below, giving them a path to the island.

“Ray, Shooting Star.”

The dragon’s body and its passengers were blanketed in light. They shot forward—a movement skill he used to knock back incoming monsters while also propelling them toward the island.

It was far more effective than anticipated, and they burst through

the cluster around them, closing in on the island fast.

“We’ll watch our six!”

“You’ll be more effective focused on the monsters ahead.”

Iz and Misery took aim at their pursuers, while Pain and Kanade fended off the rest.

“Okay, we can land here.”

Safely on the floating island, Pain changed Ray back to its normal size and looked around. They were at the island’s rim, in a clearing that just begged to be landed in. The island itself wasn’t large by any means, and they could easily walk from rim to rim in a matter of minutes.

“Guess we’ll have to head into that forest.”

“Yeah. Stay on guard.”

Pain led the way as they ventured beneath the boughs. Didn’t seem like this forest had monsters in it; it was very different from the terrain below.

“Suspicious. Keep your eyes peeled for traps.”

“No, this is a tad more obvious. Look there.”

Kanade pointed ahead, where a building lay hidden in the forest.

“A manor...?”

“A clear invitation. Shall we?”

“What choice do we have?”

They pushed open the front doors and stepped inside. There was a grand entrance and a magic circle on the floor that looked to be drawn with blood.

“Already? At least they didn’t make us work for it.”

“Let’s get damage negation and healing ready in case it’s a trap.”

Once their support abilities were ready, they had no reason to hesitate. They were here to clear dungeons, after all. Their caution about traps proved unfounded, and the familiar light wrapped around them, transporting them away. When the light died down, they found themselves in a man-made passage with brick walls on three sides. Only one way to go.

“Guess we move out.”

“Yes. Not sensing any monsters yet.”

Pain was their best fighter, so he led the way. Soon, they found themselves in a room with three doors. Each had a mark on it: a sword, a staff, and a spear. Clearly indicative of something important.

“Hmm, interesting.”

“Think it signifies what type of monsters are on the other side?”

“That’s what I was thinking. In that case, which do we think we can handle?”

They talked it over and settled on the sword door.

Inside was an unobstructed arena. On the far side stood a monster

in a suit of armor, helmet and all, carrying a greatsword.

“Looks like our call was on the money.”

“And if it’s just one foe, that makes it easier.”

This party’s core strategy was to put Pain out in front and then have the other three buff him, creating an unstoppable juggernaut. The support package consisted of spells to block status effects, heal him, revive him, expand his range—the works.

“With all this, I can’t imagine losing. Time to do my part.”

Pain drew his sword and faced down the monster.

This was a test of their strategy, so they’d begun by buffing him and not debuffing their foe. None of the skills used was at all rare, but it was still a ridiculous amount to put on one man. When he was sure he’d adjusted to the buffs, he stepped forward, approaching before their foe could move.

“Ray, Palidragon’s Breath. Holy Schism.”

The dragon shot a gleaming white beam that racked up damage and toppled the foe.

Pain charged, drawing his holy sword, and sliced deep into the torso. Then he dodged the monster’s vertical slash and sliced it diagonally from shoulder to belly. The monster was swinging wildly. If it made contact, it would surely hurt. But Pain expertly deflected or dodged, and it never once harmed him.

The buffs certainly helped, but above all, this monster was clearly just nowhere near as good with a blade.

“Holy Condemnation!”

At his shout, his sword began to glow, and his next horizontal slash cleaved his foe in half. With no risk, never once letting up, he had made short work of the enemy.

“Exceeded my expectations.”

“He’s a lot like that tower’s tenth-floor boss. Just raw strength.”

“This suggests our buffs alone should keep him going till we have to deal with a crowd.”

In awe of his power, they headed through the door at the back of the arena. This time there were two doors, one with a katana and one with a bow.

“Which do you prefer?”

“The katana. Easier at close range.”

They headed through the corresponding door. Once again, an arena, but this time occupied by a samurai.

“I see. Let’s handle this while the buffs are still good. Back me up.”

“Of course.”

“Anytime.”

“Ready to heal as needed.”

Pain stepped forward, sword in one hand, shield in the other. He kept that shield high as he closed in, and the moment he was in range, the samurai's katana lashed out, far too fast for Pain's eye to see. Sword and shield alone were not enough to block it, and damage sparks sprayed from his arm and shoulder, the knockback forcing him away. Misery healed him up quickly, and there was no lasting penalty, but they were left glaring at each other.

"I thought as much. A very different type from the last fighter."

"Follow the plan?"

"Yes, it's best we do. Immobility!"

Pain's skill prevented knockback effects. He charged in again without raising his shield.

"Sou, Gravity Cage."

"Fey, Grab Grass."

If it was readying itself for an *iai* strike—maintaining heightened awareness and quickly drawing the sword in response to an attack—it would be easy to land single-point spells. Kanade instructed Sou to drop a skill that provided a major speed debuff on its location, and Iz bound its feet to the spot, preventing it from moving out of range. This meant the samurai had no way of fleeing Pain's onslaught.

As Pain drew closer, once more the samurai unleashed a strike too fast for the eye to see. But Pain no longer cared, raising his sword high. The katana sank deep into him, but he swung right on through.

"Rejuvenation Light!"

Pain had numbers on his side, so they took advantage of that.

With no knockback in place, Pain just hammered away relentlessly. Since this samurai was all about speed, it didn't have the HP to withstand this barrage for long. Without Misery here, this strategy would never have worked. Her healing kept Pain from going down as his brutal strikes racked up the damage. And the samurai had no way of fighting a player who could survive the *iai*'s force.

"Holy Breach!"

His glowing sword swung through the samurai's guard, deep into its neck, and it burst into light.

Pain was OP enough, but they buffed him even more and moved on. It was no wonder the monsters couldn't stand up to him.

"Let's keep moving. They'll probably throw more at us next."

Figuring they should take out as many as they could, they headed through the next door.

Ultimately, Pain was right. The numbers steadily increased. From two to three, from three to four. Sometimes even more foes than they had party members.

But none of that mattered. The plan had always been for Pain to handle the fighting and the others to buff and run interference, and that strategy worked on all these foes. Quantity changed nothing. The back line simply started throwing out attacks of their own to keep things manageable.

Bombs rolled across the floor, grimoires leaped off the shelves, and the whole party was required to handle offense and defense after they began resorting to AOE buffs and AOE healing. Nothing they met had the capacity to get past their vanguard fighter and halt the chaos sown by the rear guard.

“Whew, the boss at last. That was more rooms than I anticipated.”

“Yeah. Wonder what this boss’ll be?”

“The way here provided few clues. But they’ve all been humanoid, so the boss might follow suit.”

“We’ll find out inside. But let’s hope it’s easy...”

All four brought out their pets. They opened the door and stepped in.

It was a rectangular room, extending lengthwise from the door. At the far end they spotted a giant floating slab made of intricately carved stone, and as the door closed behind them, an HP bar appeared above it. None of them had seen that coming. Marks appeared around it, like those on the doors leading in.

And they were all marks from the doors they *hadn’t* chosen—mages, archers, gunners, all ranged attacks. The marks glowed, and monsters began pouring out.

“...Oh.”

“Tons of ranged fighters.”

“Then plan B it is.”

“I’ll buy us time,” Kanade said, stepping forward and reaching for his stacks.

“Numbing Powder. High Tide. Sticky Bullets. Mana Interference.”

He just kept calmly pulling affliction grimoires and activating the spells within. Not the half-strength ones Sou used but his own reserve. The powder paralyzed foes, waves caused a knockback, and bullets stuck the close-range fighters to the floor.

To stop the casters from overwhelming them, he used a skill that weakened their spells and shortened their range.

“Oh, the slab summons more at set intervals.”

If they didn’t stop that thing, he’d be forced to burn more grimoires without them ever getting in range.

“Mass Spell Barrier! Sou, same, Mass Spell Barrier.”

With the front line halted, the back line was piling in, and a lot of spells, arrows, and bullets were inbound. Kanade and Sou together deployed a pair of barriers that blocked them all.

And at last, Pain's slow-burn skill was ready.

"Palidragon's Lightsword!"

This was the skill he'd used while teamed up with Mii, clearing out the horde invading Maple Tree's camp. Raw power, massive range—its strength lay in its simplicity. Using this to one-shot everything was this party's ace in the hole, and a boss that summoned tons of adds was the perfect place to bust it out.



Light and shock waves went everywhere, vaporizing the minions. Before the light could fade, they hopped on Ray's back and used Shooting Star to close in on the summoning slab itself.

"Keep up the pressure!"

Each of the back-line fighters started pulling out bombs—pre-supplied by Iz—and rolling them forward.

Ray's charge itself dented the slab, and each of them piled on damage. Since the slab was all about fast summons and reliant on foes the players had avoided, it did not have that many direct-attack spells, and none that could overwhelm Misery's healing. They steadily ground its HP down.

A summoner with no real combat skills was no match for a foe that could one-shot anything it summoned.

"Holy Condemnation!"

"Holy Spear!"

"Fey, Item Boost, Recycle."

"Tornado!"

The flashy attack effects downed the slab, adding to the damage Pain's powerful AOE had done. A crack appeared in the stone's side, and it shattered.

"Our strat actually worked?"

"That turned out nicely. The shape of the room was perfect for my skill."

"I was a bit worried when I saw all those mages and archers, but we stomped 'em."

"Very impressive."

There was a beep, and everyone was awarded a medal.

There was still plenty of time left before midnight, so they headed out to find more dungeons. Powerful skills with daily limits were always good to use before the date changed.

First, though, they were transported back to the manor they'd come from.

The party made up of Drag, Shin, Chrome, and Kasumi headed south. This party, too, had someone who could carry all the members—Kasumi. She'd had Haku use Supergiant, and they were headed for the desert where Maple Tree had started out the first day. This was because they'd hit a number of Sally's marks already and come up empty. The southern marks had been clustered together and were easy to check in rapid succession, but there hadn't been all that many in the first place.

Since their priority leads had been less than fruitful, they were hoping for more luck in the desert. Sally hadn't spotted anything too promising, but it seemed like the area might hold hard-to-find secrets.

"I thought as much with Pain's dragon, but mountable pets that give you a ride sure have their upsides."

"Our Mii says it's a huge help getting around."

"Mobility does up your clearing speeds. If only we could find something to clear..."

"No such luck. Teams that went in other directions are obviously making headway, but..."

All of them had received the medal acquisition alerts.

They were eager to achieve results of their own, so they kept their eyes peeled on the horizon. In the distance, some players were fighting worms and devils, and there were magic lights flying.

"Looks like there are still players at the edge of the map."

"Everybody must be thinking the same thing. A desert like this has gotta have something."

They moved on, and suddenly the weather turned on them—a powerful sandstorm had arrived. They braced themselves, but despite their proximity to the map's edge, none of those hordes of devils was coming after them. As the party tank, Chrome had been extra vigilant but found no signs of any monsters.

"This feels promising. Kasumi! Should we dismount?"

"Yeah, maybe best."

Feeling like this storm must be hiding something, they changed Haku back to regular size and resumed their journey on foot.

"It really is a hell of a storm. I can barely see anything."

"Maybe I should have the Splinter Sword shards fly around us. That would tell us if anything's coming, at least."

Shin used his signature skill, and the blades began swirling in a circle around the party. If anything sizable came rushing at them from

any direction, they'd take a hit—warning the group of the incoming attack. They didn't walk far before this paid off.

“Oh, hit something...but doesn't feel like a monster.”

“Let's go there. Might be what we're looking for.”

They did just that and found some rocks half buried in the storm's sands, with a gap between them leading underground.

“Worth a shot. Luck might finally be on our side.”

“Yes, looks like. The gap's too narrow, though, so Haku can't go Supergiant in there.”

They squeezed on in. Below, they found an underground space, the sound of falling sand buffeting them from all sides. As they descended, their feet sank into the sand with each step, making it easy to stumble.

“Yeah, this looks like the real deal. Finally.”

“I guess I'd better lead.”

“Mm-hmm, go for it, Chrome.”

“Let's see what it throws at us.”

Chrome took one step ahead, and a large scorpion leaped out of the sand at his feet. Before anyone's weapons could reach it, it stabbed Chrome and dove back underground.

Lights appeared around him, signaling the activation of an item Iz had given him a while back—an item that would block instant-death attacks.

“Y-you're kidding? Scorpions with a one-hit KO?”

“Maybe we'd better retreat!”

“Then climb on these and stay off the ground,” Shin said. He had his Splinter Sword act as floating platforms for each of them. Drag hesitated a moment, but Chrome and Kasumi spent enough time around Maple that they were used to these things and quickly took refuge, ready to discuss options.

“Didn't know your skill could do *this*, Shin,” Kasumi said, gesturing at her feet.

“Took a page out of Maple's book. Figured there might be more I could do with flying blades.”

“So what do we do? I've got Iz's thing that blocks instant death, but that ain't something you wanna use up on a trash mob.”

“Ain't no biggie. I'll handle 'em. We just gotta know where the scorpions are hiding, right?”

Drag called out his golem. Earth had all kinds of skills involving its namesake element—skills that could handle monsters hiding underground.

“Earth, Quake!”

Drag went for the simplest approach, shaking the whole area so they could spot the damage sparks. This showed exactly where the

monsters were.

“Shin, all you! Your blades can reach ’em safely.”

“Yup!”

Shin sent any blades still available into the sparking sand, then pulled them back up.

Each emerged with a black scorpion skewered on the blade. Unable to free themselves, they soon shattered.

“At least they have no HP. But we’ll need to rinse and repeat before walking across any sand.”

“That’s fine, but this boss is gonna suuuck.”

If the monsters leading in were that nasty, the boss was gonna be a real piece of work.

“At least we *can* deal with ’em. And we’re lucky Chrome was their first victim.”

Anyone else would have been eliminated before they knew what hit ’em. A sharp reminder of the dangers of wanton dungeon exploration...that failed to dissuade anyone there.

For a while, they moved slowly. Drag and Earth hit sands with an AOE, and the others finished off what popped out or got skewered, moving on when it was safe. At last, they reached an area with no sand underfoot.

“Whew...that’s a relief. We can relax a bit now.”

“Those scorpions were a real nightmare. I never wanna see sand again.”

“Splinter Sword really bailed us out. I’m thinking we’re, like, halfway now?”

“The ground changing to stone feels like a progress marker.”

With no need to watch their every step, their pace sped up. Chrome stayed out in front and was the first to spot a new type of monster.

“Oof, now we got snakes. They’re crawling out of holes in the rock.”

“Bet their poison’s a one-hit KO, too. Kill ’em first.”

The snakes were also pretty low-HP, so they were now convinced this dungeon’s theme was all about surprise fatality.

“Sure is stressful.”

“I just wanna get to the boss...but what’s that?”

Chrome had just rounded a corner, and ahead of him, he saw a number of flowers blooming on the rock wall. At this point, they assumed everything here could instantly kill, so they moved past the flowers very carefully, avoiding contact, not making a sound. Naturally, it wasn’t that easy. Snakes shot out of the walls, rubbing

against the flowers, which rang like *bells*. The sound summoned even more snakes.

“Ah, shit! We were almost through!”

“Wen, Wind God.”

To clear out the wave of snakes, Shin was forced to resort to his wind blades. That would hit all the flowers, too, but they would have wound up bitten otherwise. He also had his splinters spinning around them, cutting any snakes that got too close.

“Hit anything that might break through! My control isn’t that precise!”

“We gotta knock ’em back! Ground Wave!”

“Necro, Death Flame!”

“Blood Blade!”

With this many snakes, the only way to avoid fatal bites was to bust out every multi-target move they had. Rather than try to get away, it seemed best to go for broke and eliminate them all. The results proved they’d made the right choice. Still, fighting where any damage meant death took a lot out of them, and when it was over, everyone released a sigh of relief.

“Let’s find that boss room fast. This dungeon is too much.”

“Agreed.”

They made it through the rest of the passage without setting off the flowers again.

Their wishes were granted, and it didn’t take that much longer. They fended off a few more waves of snakes and found the view opening up to a large door.

“Okay, I’ll do the honors. Ready?”

“I’m good.”

“Yup, ready to go.”

“On your call.”

Consensus achieved, Chrome led the way inside. Sand was falling through cracks in the ceiling, leaving piles below, and the floor itself was all sand. They stood in the doorway a moment, but nothing emerged—which in itself was suspicious.

“Is it empty...?”

“No, I bet something’s buried in that heap at the back. It’s extremely sus.”

Not about to approach it himself, Shin sent his blades instead, digging into the heap. Kasumi used a skill of her own, trying to figure out what was lying in wait.

“Keen Sight. Human bones? No, there’s something inside it... A crystal snake? *And* a scorpion?”

Something gleamed inside the skull, and the moment they realized it was two creatures made entirely of crystal, both scrambled out of the skull and hid in the sand.

Then oodles of the ordinary black snakes and scorpions emerged from the other heaps.

“““““This again?!”””””

All four screamed. They'd seen it coming but sure hoped it wouldn't.

The crystal snake and scorpion were clearly the bosses here, but to even get to them, they'd have to survive a gauntlet of instadeath-dealing trash mobs.

The last kind of enemy you wanted to see in a boss room, but here they were. They steeled their nerves and raised their weapons.

“The scorpions we know are bad. Shin and I'll take them. Kasumi and Chrome, you go for the snakes.”

““On it!””

“Ground Wave! Earth, Quake!”

“Wen, Wind God! Splinter Sword!”

Drag rocked the ground, hurting every scorpion in the area and using the knockback to force them out of the sand.

Shin upped his splinter count to max and had them skim across the surface of the sand, slamming into the sides of every enemy.

“Death Flame!”

“Armored Arms! Blood Blade!”

On the other side, Chrome stepped in front to draw aggro, and his flames scorched the slithering mob. What snakes survived that were sideswiped by a liquid blade—the same tactic Shin was using.

But more snakes and scorpions emerged to replace them. They were getting nowhere.

“We're burning through skills to handle this at all! Won't be long before everything's on cooldown!”

“The crystal ones are around here somewhere! We know they're the bosses; we just gotta track 'em down!”

Kasumi and Chrome couldn't keep up those AOE's forever. Shin's splinters could hold the line for a time, but if anything got through, their entire formation would crumble.

“Tch, okay,” Drag grunted. “All cards on the table. Earth, Raging Land.”

The golem's skill made almost the entire floor glow red. Jagged rock spikes shot out of it, mercilessly forcing snakes and scorpions out of the sand and turning them into shish kebabs.

“There! At the back!” Kasumi yelled. She'd been watching like a hawk, and she spotted the crystal foes first.

“Yeah, on it!” Shin yelled, his blades pounding home. “I get 'em?”

“No, it’s not over yet.”

At a certain damage threshold, both had wriggled away and took cover under the sands. The party braced for another wave of adds, but none emerged.

That put a frown on every face, but the heap at the back stirred, drawing their attention. They were ready for something to leap out at them, but instead, the mound split into two, and the twin heaps started morphing. The final result: a snake and a scorpion made of sand, each larger than the entire party. Crystals studded both monsters’ bodies, and as they spawned, all remaining ordinary enemies vanished.

They’d done enough damage to trigger the next stage of the boss fight.

Normally, that would make anyone brace themselves, but they just grinned. This was what they’d been waiting for.

“Time for a frontal assault!”

“I’ll draw aggro; you hit the opening.”

“Scorpion first—it looks harder.”

“Yes, Armor Arms should help here.”

They finally had a *proper* boss to fight, and it didn’t have that much HP left. Eager to enjoy a real boss fight, they charged in.

“Taunt! Necro, Impact Reflection.”

“Ground Splitter!”

As Chrome closed in, baiting the scorpion, it did what scorpions do, attacking with claws and tail, and also made sand spikes shoot out of the ground, like Drag’s move. But Chrome deflected all of this, keeping up the pressure. Some sand spikes hit home, but his recovery speed was more than enough to compensate.

While he kept the scorpion busy, Drag split the earth between it and the snake, blocking it from joining in.

Meanwhile, Kasumi and Shin each picked a side, aiming their blows at the obvious weaknesses—the exposed bits of the crystal body.

Shin focused all his shards on a single point and had them move at maximum speed. Kasumi had her own blade and the extra limbs join forces for a triple thrust. There was a snap as all blades shattered the crystals, and the sand body crumbled away.

“Well, that was easy.”

“Next!”

“Do I even need to worry about aggro?”

Drag was already attacking, and they ran to join him. The snake lasted no longer than its partner.



The last four players—Maple, Sally, Mii, and Frederica—had headed north.

They had their choice of movement options—Syrup, Ignis, or Atrocity Maple—but Ignis had the advantage of speed and not being an irreversible transformation.

“Oh, another medal! They’re so fast...”

“Yet we haven’t even seen a dungeon. Well, we cleared one, but it was a bust.”

“I thought it was too easy, so I wasn’t surprised.”

“I mean, it was easy ’cause Maple was with us, right? Martyr’s Devotion totally rendered that boss helpless.”

“But I’m starting to see the chinks in that armor; we’ve fought together enough.”

Maple’s skills were all extremely situational. Monsters that resisted poison or had high defense took Hydra and Machine God off the table. Despite her high defense, she did solid damage, but she had no way of boosting that damage. Mii had pointed this out on the seventh layer. Since everyone else was steadily increasing their attack, Maple’s was starting to lag behind.

“But you do realize you doing that much damage in the first place has always been *weird*.”

“Really?”

“I’ll give her that one.”

“Et tu, Sally?!”

Sally laughed. Her faith in her guild master was evident. To begin with, the reason they could relax and chat like this was because Maple’s skill offered them total protection.

“Now what? We’ve hit up all the marks you made on this end of the map.”

“Gotta scan for landmarks from above, I guess. The map was always big, so not like I went everywhere.”

Sally had merely marked a few places during the prelims as she raced around racking up points; her primary goal had always been doing well enough to play on this difficulty.

“Then let’s just be systematic. Hngg, could take a while.”

“Mm-hmm, true.”

“Argh, we need a plan!”

“Should we land? Hard to make out details from up here. And there’s no chance of us accidentally stumbling across a dungeon in the air.”

Everyone nodded, and Mii brought Ignis down. No sooner had they landed than the brushes around them stirred, and out came the four-legged devils, the main monster of the second night.

“Here we go again. Mock Maples.”

“Huh? What? Me?”

“I do see the resemblance.”

The creatures Frederica had dubbed “Mock Maples” were clawing at her, but the real Maple nullified all that damage.

“It sure does make being outside safe!”

Frederica bonked the monster on the head with her staff, and then Mii brought in her signature Flame Empress fireballs, burning the devil to a crisp.

“Shall we go for a stroll?”

“Yup, yup. I’ll do my bit.”

“Same! Full Deploy! Commence Assault.”

Sally was hanging back out of their line of fire.

Since they weren’t taking any damage, the result was one-sided domination.

But as they cleared the monsters out, Mii noticed something odd.

“There sure are a *lot* of monsters here.”

“Not just ‘cause it’s the edge of the map?”

“...Even so, it’s more than you’d expect.”

They’d already cleared one dungeon and had spent their fair share of time around the edge. The waves there had never been this intense.

“What do we think? Just a monster spawn point?”

“Let’s hope not. But they might be protecting something. Let’s look around. It’s getting late, so this might be our last shot.”

The plan was to head back to the camp early, in case of surprises. And to avoid a performance dip from rolling straight into the third day without any rest.

With that in mind, they would have to call off the search soon. Given the travel time, this was their last chance to find anything.

“Right, let’s see where these things are coming from!”

“Yeah, hopefully it’s not far.”

Since Mii and Sally had plenty of offense, they could generally fight stuff with Martyr’s Devotion as a guardian angel, making exploration a breeze. They did just that while searching the area, and their suspicions were proving true.

“There really *are* a lot!”

“Yup. There’s gotta be a reason.”

They headed into the thick of the mob and spotted a portal through the trees, made of swirling purple light.

It wasn’t just devils piling out; there were also the dinosaurs and giant crocodiles Maple had fought in the prelims.

“Doesn’t...really seem like a dungeon. What do you think, Sally?”

“Hmm, definitely a different deal.”

“But we can’t be sure. We’ve got Maple with us, so why not go poke it?”

"It does seem worth a try."

They'd come this far, might as well be sure.

"But there are all kinds of creatures here, and some of them might have piercing attacks."

"Agh, good point. Um, trying to do hit-and-run seems risky. Should we fly?"

"On Ignis? With all these trees, it would be the long way...but from that side..."

"Wait, Maple, you meant the other thing?"

"Yup! With this!"

Maple patted the artillery bristling from her back. Sally was taking that in stride, which forced Frederica and Mii to give the matter due consideration. They just assumed that all that weaponry also included a flight skill.

"If you say so, I'm in."

"Okay! Everyone put your arms around me!"

"Hmm? Uh, you mean...?"

"L-like this?"

Once all three had a hold, Maple pulled a rope out of her item box and tied them all on.

"Deep breath... Okay, Maple. Do your worst."

"Wh-why so tense? ...Wait, is this like when she fell out of the sky during the guild wars?!"

An image of an impossible explosion popped out of the depths of Frederica's memories.

"Commence Assault!"

"O-oh no! Augh?!"

The array of lasers on her back started charging, and when they hit their limits, her artillery fired. The sheer force of the blast propelled them forward like a cannonball, through the trees, straight into the purple glow.

It definitely *was* a portal, and when they passed through it, it was nice enough to slow them down, depositing them gently on the far side.

"We're here! Thanks for riding! It was short but sweet."

"G-good lord! Not a flight I'd take again."

"...The first time I have ever *not* envied mobility."

"Heh. You get used to it."

"You were acting all normal! I never suspected!"

"That is Maple's normal."

Frederica longed to argue that point, but they *had* passed through a portal, so she shifted her focus to that instead. They were now inside the source of that monster infestation.

"Don't see anything particularly weird..."

They were in a wide-open space, with dark-purple walls and a floor. Both of those occasionally moved, a sign that this was no ordinary dungeon.

“But at least it didn’t drop us right on top of a bunch of monsters!”

“True. Guess we’ll just have to look around.”

And with that, they headed into the dungeon depths.

The passages forked often, and the group randomly chose right or left, then were frequently assaulted by Mock Maples and horned devils with bat-like wings. They seemed to have some means of telling where players were before they came into view, so even if they stood still, monsters came running in. No matter how foolhardy a charge that was.

“With Maple around, these two types ain’t no thing.”

“But they *are* good XP. Keep it up!”

“Iz loaded us up with MP potions, so we totally can.”

“...If these are inside the dungeon, then the portal itself must have spawned on day two. If there’d been purple-light portals floating around in the prelims, someone would have noticed.”

Maple was notorious for her limited-use skills, and Mii wasn’t exactly fuel efficient, either. She had to chug a potion every few enemies she downed.

Sally was cutting through her share of devils, too. They headed farther in. Maple’s build was so extreme that she could either make a dungeon a cakewalk or be left sort of helpless. This seemed to be the former. But the dungeon wasn’t just about flooding them with enemies. After some progress, they found themselves in an open chamber like the start location. The walls inside were no longer solid purple—they had white swellings on them.

“Hmm, what are those things? Pods?”

“Should I shoot ’em?”

“No, better not. No telling what’ll pop out.”

“Seems they aren’t waiting for us to try anything.”

Mii pointed at one of the swellings. More accurately, it seemed to be some sort of pupa or cocoon. It had split as they approached, and a monster was sliding out of it.

The sheer quantity of pods in here reminded Maple and Sally of the tower’s monster houses, and they started barking orders.

“If they’ve got pointy weapons or horns, kill those first!”

“We’re good as long as they don’t have piercing damage!”

“Oh, that makes sense—got it.”

“That means I can waltz out in front and look for those monsters.

Easy peasy.”

Some of these devils had spears, so they hit those first, then anything with sharp fangs or claws. Any power types with bulging muscles could wait. Strength couldn't break through Maple's protection, so they were low priority.

“Flame Empress! Ignis, Fastened Flames!”

“Oboro, Whet Wisp, Spreading Flames!”

Both called up fires and scorched the horde. These skills both chained damage and really shone when fighting large numbers—there was no shortage of that here.

“Hydra!”

“Maple really does destroy crowds...”

She had the defense to shut down anything without AOE or effective attacks. Made all the more effective when she had players on her side. Defense was Maple's essence, her be-all and end-all.

Once they eliminated anything likely to have piercing attacks, the odds were in their favor. They switched to conserving resources, which meant Sally did most of the work, since she could rack up damage without MP.

“Whew, done.”

“Thanks, Sally! There were a lot, but you never broke a sweat.”

“Yeah, you make that possible.”

“Eh-heh-heh, do I?”

“There's an exit on the far side. At this rate, we'll likely have no issues reaching the boss.”

“Yup! C'mon, let's move!”

Careful to stay in range of Martyr's Devotion, they moved on and found more white pods on the walls ahead, clearly now this dungeon's thing. These spawns meant the enemy volume was a lot higher than the earlier stages.

“Oh, right! Before the date changes—Atrocity!”

There were only minutes left in the day, so Maple used her limited skill. It would certainly help out in this dungeon. She'd been playing nice, merely firing lasers and scattering poison, but now Maple was showing off what a monster she could be.

“Oh, Genuine Maple arrives!”

“Am I not normally?!”

“I thought as much when I saw Haku, but turns out size does matter.”

Maple's massive maw yawned wide, and she charged headfirst down the passage. The architecture here was hardly designed to accommodate her bulk, so she had to keep her head down, but that also meant no monsters here could flank her.

Maple kept those jaws chomping as the monsters charged right in

and were either brutally swallowed whole or chewed to pieces. Any monsters that managed to survive the mandibles of death were stomped flat by her six legs, turned into rags in her wake.

“Multi-Wind Blades!”

And the few survivors were shown no pity. The other three players were just casting spells to finish them off.

“This form does make short work of the trash mobs...”

“That it does. Not that players usually have other forms...”

Breathing fire, her charge devastated all in her path, and before they knew it, they were at the boss room.

“Different guilds, different dungeon tactics.”

“I can safely say this one is just Maple being herself.”

The rest of her guild couldn’t imitate that. They might each have their own form of crazy, but nobody else was this bad.

“Can I open it up?”

“Go right ahead.”

Maple pushed the door open with her head and found the walls inside covered with the white monster pods and an especially large white orb at the far end of the room. This one was definitely a cocoon.

As they stepped in, the cocoon split open, and purple light poured out. Long, twisted claws. Ten-plus limbs. A head with no face. Wings with ragged membranes. Frederica had dubbed those early monsters “Mock Maples,” but this looked like one of those had been illegally modified.

“What do we call this one? A ‘Mock Maple Major’?!”

“Stop blabbing and fight!”

“Let’s go all out.”

“Incoming!”

Fully emerged from the cocoon, it flapped its wings, clattered its claws, and lunged at the party.

The boss swung its long limbs with momentum to spare, and they stretched like rubber, coming at the party fast from both sides.

“Multi-Barrier! Notes, Round!”

Frederica threw up defenses before herself and Mii. She knew Sally would dodge this effortlessly, and Maple was too big for her spells to guard, so no use trying.

“Gah, that hits hard!”

The arms were much higher damage than she’d anticipated, and they shattered her barriers. But there was value in disrupting their momentum.

“Flare Impetus!”

Mii shot forward and snatched Frederica up in passing, escaping outside the talons’ range.

“Nice work, Mii!”

“Stay focused!”

Frederica had called it: Sally had dodged right through everything, and Maple had proved too big to dodge anything, and the talons hit head-on.

Both her monstrous flanks were covered in claw marks, spraying red sparks.

It wasn't quite enough damage to rid her of the Atrocity body, but it wouldn't last long.

“Urgh, they're all piercing...!”

“Mii! Frederica! Go from above! Ice Pillar!”

“Ignis, Eternal Flame!”

“Yup, yup, Multi-Crush!”

Before the boss could attack again, Frederica's gravity spell slowed it down.

Sally came in from the left and Mii on Ignis from the right, both getting above it and slamming attacks down.

“Quintuple Slash!”

“Flame Empress!”

Sally reached the head and fired up a combo skill, slashing from the head down the back, then rolling around the boss's rear. Mii took advantage of her phoenix's mobility, dodging through its slashing claws, her damage enough to slam the boss into the ground.

Maple had been waiting for that, and she came charging in for some payback, ripping its arms off with her teeth.

But the boss didn't simply sit and take the punishment. It was slashing back at her and scorching her hide with purple light beams fired out of its maw.

“““””””

The cannibalistic *kaiju* display momentarily stunned the others, but they recovered and moved to back up Maple.

With their help, Maple was able to lay down the hurt. A trio of spells made it flinch; then Maple pounced, her six limbs holding it fast as she breathed infernal flames in its face. With Martyr's Devotion, no matter how the boss thrashed around, her allies could easily stay in the fray.

But the boss stubbornly hung in there, and before she could consume it whole, it tore her Atrocity form away. The real Maple fell to the ground. With a sudden size advantage, the boss now loomed over *her*. That didn't really bother Maple, but then its belly started churning, and when sharp needles emerged, she freaked out.

“Ah! Um, Pierce Guard!”

She still wasn't used to breaking out that skill very often and just barely managed to null the needle strike. A moment later, she was

hidden beneath its bulk.

“Maple, you okay?” Sally yelled.

In lieu of an answer, there was a thud underneath it, and damage sparks sprayed everywhere. Something wreathed in black fog rose up behind it—five wriggling tentacles.

“Boss gimmick? Self-destruct into a new form?”

“No, that’s, uh...”

“Maple.”

“Hah...?!”

The tentacles did their job, prying Maple out of a hole in the boss’s back.

“Whew, escape successful! Uhhh, Cover Move!”

Scrambling to her feet, she decided to gain some distance and teleported herself over to Sally.

“How we doing? I feel like I did a lot of damage...”

“We’re about halfway. It’s a real damage-sponge. Fire might not be effective here.”

Since Maple’s tentacles were all offense, she put her arm back to normal while they awaited the boss’s next move.

“I still have Devour left!”

She’d spent the second day at their base or blowing herself up to signal the others.

For that reason, she didn’t have much Machine God ammo but had nearly full stock on big moves like Devour, Hydra, or Predators.

The party waited for the boss to act, and it moved over to the cocoon that had birthed it. Purple light began pouring out.

“Brace yourselves!”

The brightness peaked, and the boss itself began to glow. Several magic circles spawned—each belching purple flames at the party.

“Multi-Hasten! Multi-Barrier!”

Speed-buffed, three of them took evasive action. Maple just braced her shield, soaking the blow head-on. Devour swallowed up the purple flames, but the sheer volume of them meant she ran out of uses before they stopped coming. Now she was merely blocking, fires raging around her and chiseling away at her health.

“I knew it! Fire’s bad news!”

Maple had not had great experience with fire damage, so she quickly deployed her artillery and blasted herself to the rear.

“We can dodge, so we’ll pull it away while you heal up!”

“Okay! Thanks!”

Sally heightened her focus and slipped between the bursting flames, closing in fast.

“Waterway! Subzero Domain!”

A shaft of water stretched out from beneath Sally’s feet, and her

entire body began emitting an icy chill. The world around her swiftly froze. Her daggers now shifted back and forth between Oboro's flames and Subzero Domain's ice. Scattering both elements, the watery path freezing beneath her feet, Sally aimed to flatten that boss again.

"I can move pretty freely through the air now! Ice Pillar!"

Sally had a skill that generated platforms underfoot and one that let her swing from webs. She was dodging all the boss's flames, bounding around the area as easily as if she was on solid ground, doing hit-and-away to pile on the damage.

"Okay, it turned toward me..."

Since only Sally had been on the offense, she'd drawn aggro. All the flames were coming her way, like she wanted. Now she just had to dodge them all.

"Focus...!"

Bulky bosses like this weren't generally built for precision attacks, and this was no exception; it was simply blanketing the area in flames. The fire stayed on the ground, which forced her into the air, dodging upward.

They'd faced a much stronger boss in the tower from the last event, with floors that did damage but much more accurate attacks. So Sally was dodging here like she could see the future.

"Wow..."

"Frederica, Mii, Maple, ready yet?"

"Mm-hmm! We are!"

"Good to go."

"Ready to buff!"

"Then, Superspeed! Oboro, Spirited Away!"

Sally sped up, racing toward her party and using her pet's skill to phase through the claws that slashed her back. Taking her place were Syrup and Ignis—both Giganticized; Maple, bristling with weaponry; and Mii, wreathed in her own flames.

"Time for the final touch! Notes, Amplify!"

"Funeral Pyre!"

"Commence Assault! Hydra! Saturating Chaos!"

Frederica's skill upped their power, and the other two unleashed their strongest moves. Syrup and Ignis followed suit, firing lasers and billowing flames.

All this met the purple flames head-on. Flashing particle effects erupted. While Sally had it distracted, they'd piled on all the buffs they could, and their barrage forced the boss's flames back and annihilated it *and* the cocoon behind it in a prodigious explosion.

When the light vanished, the cocoons on the walls crumbled away. Smoke rising from every inch of it, the boss's body shattered into light.

“Whew, okay! We won!”

“Yeah, good barrage. Thanks, Frederica.”

“When you hit it that hard, it makes the buffs feel worth it!”

“And we got a medal this time. Now we can go home all smiles.”

“Cool, then let’s head back carefully! It’d be terrible to get taken out now!”

They’d probably be the last to return to camp, but they left the dungeon certain they would make it home.

All twelve of their companions were, indeed, waiting for them.

Maple waved both hands as she ran over, relieved to see everyone safe and sound.

“Great work, everyone! It really paid off!”

“Yes, we saw you found one, too. Our dungeon...was a bit of a headache, but it worked out.”

“Our plan to just keep Pain buffed worked like a charm, so it was a cakewalk.”

““Everyone on our team was so strong!””

“Great! Er, um, thanks for exploring with us! It helped us earn a lot of medals!”

Maple happily went around thanking the Order and Flame Empire members, only for Pain and Mii to assure her they were the grateful ones.

“If we’d gone our own way, we’d have been lucky to get one. You were a huge help.”

“There’s much to be said for cooperation.”

Their smiles left Maple beaming.

“Can’t wait for day three!”

“You bet.”

“Yeah, we’ll do whatever it takes to survive.”

They might be rivals, but to Maple, they were all friends. It was only natural to wish them the best.

“I’ll take watch tonight. Consider it payment for the camp and medals.”

“I’ll join you. It’s only right considering how much help we’ve received.”

“Eh-heh-heh, well, thanks!”

Promising she’d come running if anything went wrong, Maple headed into the common area.



“They’re grabbing medals like crazy.”

“That they are. But if we designed the medals for this crowd, no one else would stand a chance...”

The dev frowned, glancing over the medal counts for the Order of the Holy Sword, Flame Empire, and Maple Tree. The first two were large guilds with many skilled players, and they had more medals than just what Mii and Pain had personally collected.

“Aggressive play. They aren’t sleeping at night?”

“And good instincts. Why else push themselves to explore all evening?”

“Guess we’ll just have to see how long this sucker lasts.”

They looked over the monster’s specs one last time.

“The final day is supposed to be hard to survive... We’ll find out soon if it really is.”

All they could do was sit tight and hope for the best.

the Grand Finale Defense Build and

CHAPTER 9

Keeping watch on shifts, they made sure everyone got some rest, then hit the third morning in peak condition. Maple got out of bed, stretched, and headed next door to Sally's room.

She got there just as Sally was coming out, and they almost bumped into each other.

"Morning! Ready for day three?"

"Mm, we've got enough medals—now we just have to stay alive."

"Oh, right! Are maps and messaging back?"

"Messaging's still offline. But the map function changed again. You'll see when you look."

Maple opened her map and saw a ton of blue dots on it. And a few red ones.

"What's this? Oh, it says... Um, the blue dots are players, and the red ones are anomalous monsters?"

"Yup. Let's team up to survive or take on these 'anomalous' monsters, which, if they're on our maps, must be boss-level hard. I guess running from them is also an option. Anyone who's still kicking probably won't be fazed by the regular mobs."

"Hmm, curious."

The members of Maple Tree weren't planning on leaving camp without a good reason. The map just showed player locations and not who was where, so the Order and Flame Empire weren't particularly motivated to venture out, either.

Their plan was to stay put and fight what came at them—stick to what worked.

"This day'll be a lot shorter than the first two, which bugs me. Seems highly doubtful they did that to make survival easier."

"It'll be fine, Sally! If we all fight together, we'll win!"

"...Heh-heh, that's true. Guess there's no point overthinking it."

What mattered was staying flexible and handling whatever the game threw at them. The others all gradually stood and got ready to fight whenever.

Maple and Sally were watching the screen Marx had set up.

Since they'd been out and about last night, he'd placed several more viewpoints up outside the camp, expanding their surveillance area.

"It sure is helpful. Maybe I should look for a skill like this."

"I'm sure you could make good use of it, Sally. Oh, a monster!"

"It isn't coming inside... That's different."

The third day had dawned as dim-like as the second, and there were devils on the prowl. As they watched the stream in the common room, something far more interesting appeared.

“Oh! Sally! Look!”

“Hmm? That’s the thing from yesterday...”

One of the outside screens had suddenly filled with purple mist, and soon enough, they saw the light of that purple portal.

They watched carefully and, like the day before, it started spawning a whole mess of Mock Maples.

“Did it move here?”

“Maybe, but I bet there are just more of them out there.”

It wasn’t clear if this portal led to a dungeon, but Sally figured increased numbers were more likely than mobile portals. The main ways to up the challenge were buffed HP, high stats, and sheer quantity.

“If they’re showing up all over...that’s not good. There’s a limit to how many we can handle.”

Facing hordes took skills and spells. And as the quality of each diminished, the number of hits to down a foe increased.

Pain and Mii had their ultimate moves—Palidragon’s Lightsword and Funeral Pyre—but those couldn’t be used in rapid succession.

“We might have to ditch this cave. I mean, if the cave itself fills up with monsters and we can’t handle ’em, we’re sunk. But outside, we can at least try to run.”

“True...”

But they’d have to pick their timing carefully, Sally said. She pulled an apple out of her inventory.

“Just gotta stay flexible. You hungry, Maple?”

“Mm-hmm, thanks! You find those somewhere?”

“No, you just always have food with you, so I figured I should return the favor.”

“Heh-heh-heh...well, two can play at that!”

They enjoyed a pleasant breakfast. No monsters were attacking yet, so they enjoyed a moment of peace. But all knew this was a survival event. The monsters wouldn’t let them cool their heels forever. Every minute, they drew closer to the horde’s arrival.

In due time, waves of monsters started pouring in. Between waves, Mii and Pain stopped by the screen, checking the monster volume outside.

“I’m starting to think staying in the cave is too risky.”

“I agree. And they might give the monsters a huge buff toward the end.”

“We already need quite a few people out there to fight them off.”

Where Mii and Pain had been able to slay the entire horde with a pair of moves yesterday, today they needed buffs, delaying tactics, careful crowd control, and lots of coordination. Sally's fears had been justified. They could well find themselves drowning in monsters.

"Fortunately, we have several emergency evacuation measures. We could always wait and see, then escape as needed."

Ignis, Ray, and Syrup could all fly. Some of the monsters pouring out of that portal had wings, too, but it was still a lot less to deal with.

"Sally, let's get everyone together. I want all sixteen of us surviving if we can!"

"True. Let's do that."

Once everyone was gathered round, they talked it over and concluded that the whole team would abandon the cave after they'd fended off the next wave.

Their destination: the mountain at the center of the map. Near the peak, it would be easy to spot monsters climbing toward them and easy to flee if necessary.

"Then let's all make quick work of the next batch and head on out!" Maple concluded.

They waited for the next wave. These came at regular intervals, so they had time to collect all the items Iz had used to make the living space. Once the cave was bare rock again, the wave finally arrived.

The monster volume was still nothing to be worried about and incapable of harming these sixteen warriors, so they melted them.

"Now!"

"Mm-hmm, let's get outta here!"

They put the faster players at the head of the party, and the three with the most extreme builds did their best to keep up. Outside, the Order piled on Ray, Flame Empire on Ignis, and Maple Tree on Syrup. Syrup wasn't actually supposed to fly, and there was no way to increase its flying speed; unlike the dragon and phoenix, it could not evade incoming aerial monster attacks. But as long as Maple was on board, monsters without piercing attacks were easily handled. They could get close but weren't a risk to anyone. Fending off the occasional flier, they eventually reached the mountain where the other eight were waiting.

"Let's clear the landing zone!"

Maple changed up her gear and used Poltergeist, grabbing her lasers and slicing and dicing the monsters around her.

The rest of her guild helped, and once it was safe, she took Syrup in for a landing.

"Whew, now we just have to stay alive!"

"Mm-hmm. From up here, we'll easily spot changes coming and should be able to handle 'em."

It was pretty dark, but they had a commanding view. That would make it hard for anything to surprise them.

"I'll place some items around us. Don't want them getting to us without resistance."

"Then I'll guard you."

"I'll come with. That way we won't get surrounded."

"Thanks, appreciate it."

With Chrome and Kasumi on guard duty, Iz headed off to set out trap items. Marx accompanied them and added traps of his own. They focused their attention on areas where the paths narrowed or the footing grew unstable.

That would leave the first wave of ground-crawlers tumbling back down the slope. And while they busied themselves with setup, the rest of the team kept their eyes peeled 360 degrees, on the lookout for any changes that might signal the monsters were getting buffed.

"All clear! ...? Sally, what's up?"

"Um...look at your map."

Maple did what Sally said and saw a lot fewer player markers and many *more* anomalous monsters.

"Everyone's just running, so the number of monsters isn't going down at all."

"Survival is the priority."

"Yeah, even we didn't try and tackle them. But...this isn't a good sign."

If the devs had gone to the trouble of marking these enemies on the map, was it really a good idea to just leave them be? Sally had her doubts but lacked enough information to be sure.

"Guess we just gotta wait and see."

"Don't worry! Anything happens, I'll keep us safe!" Maple said, miming a shield bash.

"Heh-heh, thanks. I know you will."

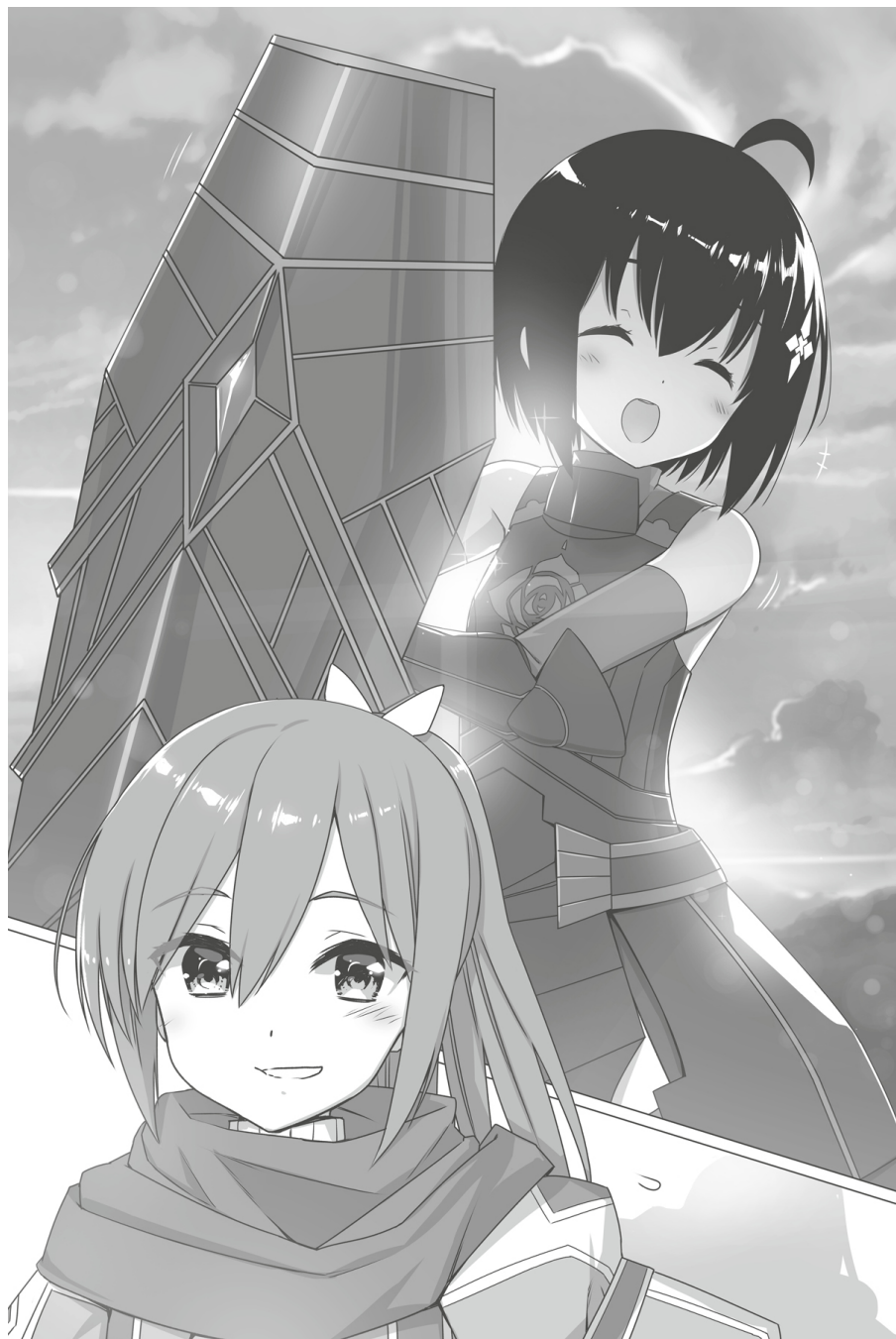
The whole point of ascending this peak was the same as delving that cave—to put themselves at an advantage in any fight to come.

Sally was reluctant to go after the anomalous monsters herself and concluded there was no point thinking about it further. She focused on helping Maple take out anything that flew in.

The expansive field of view proved to be a significant advantage. Early monster detection made them that much easier to take out.

The sixteen members of their coalition survived successfully until the final tough monster time arrived. One hour remained in the event. Far shorter than the previous nights—but that proved little comfort. If anything, it made them all nervous. There had to be something nasty

in store for them.



And they couldn't have been more right.



Across the map, players were fleeing monsters and doing their best to survive until the clock ran out. That often meant the players converged on nearby dots, forming makeshift teams. Surviving alone was nigh impossible, but numbers could solve many problems.

Here was one such team, made of dozens of players who'd lost their original parties.

"S-so far, so good!"

"Yeah, we might just get through this!"

"But the tough monster time's coming."

"We can handle it! With this many players, we can fend off most things."

Some teams were out searching for caves in which to weather the siege—but everyone was feeling pretty confident they had a shot at getting through.

That confidence shattered the moment the tough monster appeared.

The beast in the distance looked nothing like what they'd been fighting so far. It didn't look like anything that could be beaten at all. Not one player here believed they could fend *this* off.

"Run! We gotta run!"

"Yeah! Find a cave!"

"Hide somewhere that thing can't reach! We don't need to beat it! Surviving means victory!"

Abandoning all thoughts of fighting, they ran for it. The swarms of monsters around them were nothing. Knowing what you could handle was a vital skill, and this crew had made the right call.

"If the monsters have a crazy monster, then let the crazy players handle it!"

"But even they won't run at *that* thing!"

"Y-you sure? They'd have to be insane!"

Each of them had seen some absolutely madhouse stuff going down in the prelims, and they figured it was best to let monsters fight monsters.



As the tough monster time began, purple fire erupted skyward from

locations throughout the field. Sally quickly checked her map and realized this matched the locations of every anomalous monster.

Dozens of fiery pillars appeared across the land, and the flames were joining, gathering together to form a massive portal. The monster that emerged looked very familiar to four of them.

“Sally! Isn’t that the thing we beat yesterday?”

“Only waaay bigger!”

The quantity of limbs and fires burning on its wings did resemble the cocoon boss from the night before. The difference was all in the size of the body and arms—like this one had completed its metamorphosis. And the sheer colossal bulk... Well, the fact that they could make out this sort of detail from the top of the mountain should give a sense of scale.

“That’s what, fifty...a hundred yards tall?”

“I feel like this one’s a lot stronger than the genuine article!”

Arguably, Mii and Frederica were thinking the same thing.

When the boss had fully emerged from the portal, it flung its limbs out wide and released a roar that made the very air crackle. As it did, purple flames erupted all over its body.

“That’s gotta be something...above us!”

“Urgh, what is *that*?!”

Giant purple fireballs loomed in the starless sky, falling like a meteor shower.

These seemed aimed wherever players stood—including the mountain peak.

“Maple!”

“Ah! Right!”

If this was like that other boss, then it would do damage that Maple’s defense alone couldn’t handle. Sally’s yelp was all Maple needed. She immediately took the hint and switched to her angel armor, giving herself more HP.

“Heal!”

Sally topped that HP tank back up before the fireballs arrived.

“Aegis!”

A dome of light appeared just before impact, completely negating the damage and protecting everyone from the rain of fireballs.

“Earth! Ground Control!”

Before Aegis ran out, Drag handled the remaining fires, reverting the burning ground back to its original state and stifling the flames.

“Nice one, Maple!”

“Mm-hmm, but...”

If more fireballs fell, they’d need a different solution. From the peak, they could see infernos raging all around the map. That attack alone had felled many players. And worse, the anomalous monsters

were still belching columns of fire, supplying the giant devil with more flames as it stomped around searching for victims.

“Pain, Maple, we will not last an hour like this. We must take the risk and go hunt those anomalies.”

“T-totally!”

“Not only that. For the next hour, just running will not keep us alive. I imagine we’ll have to take out that giant.”

The massive devil did have an HP bar. Unlike the snails that had chased Maple around in the second event, this was clearly designed to be fought.

“That is a possibility. But our first goal has to be going around and taking down the anomalies. Marx, Misery, Shin!”

At Mii’s cry, they leaped aboard Ignis. Likewise, Pain pulled his team aboard Ray. Given the likelihood of ensuing fireball attacks aimed at clusters of players, their plan was to split up here and take out the anomalies fast.

“We’ll go, too,” Pain said. “We’ve got the mobility, so we should work fast.”

“If we still live, converge on that giant devil.”

And the eight of them were off to clear anomalies. Maple Tree had to do their part.

“S-Sally, plan?”

“At our movement speed, we won’t do well running around on these monster-infested maps. Syrup is just too slow... In which case, our best bet is to stop that giant boss from whittling down the player base.”

Each time flames fell, player dots blinked out. And that slowed the elimination of the anomalies. If they could make the boss flinch... Well, anything like that might slow things down.

“See, we’re better at boss fights than races.”

“That works. Killing that thing might get us something good.”

“If running is no good, then I’d rather give it my best shot.”

In which case, best to go all out. Maple nodded, and everyone hopped on Syrup, flying toward the giant devil.

Up close, the size was even more intimidating. It was so large, just walking carelessly in the vicinity could get you trampled underfoot. Maple put Syrup down some distance away, and Kasumi called out her snake. They rode Haku the rest of the way.

“Everyone remembers the plan?”

“Yep. Be ready to retreat if it looks dicey.”

“Ready, Sou?”

“Atrocity!”

“““Phantom World!”””

As Maple underwent her monstrous transformation, Oboro, Kanade, and Sou made clones of her. In the fourth event, there'd been seven Maples. Now there were *ten*. Each raced off, sank claws into the boss's feet, and began climbing up the legs.

“Maple! Watch out for fire!”

“I know!”

Indeed, Maple was carefully avoiding the burning patches, ripping chunks out of the hide as they climbed toward the head above.

“Whoa, that was close!”

While the giant devil was focused on attacking the players at its feet, Maple was doing damage all over. But given its sheer size, this barely scratched its HP bar.

The clones would last only three minutes, so they wanted to maximize their damage before the distraction was over.

But before that could happen, it noticed her progress—the monster's skin glowed purple, and flames erupted.

“Urgh?! Of course it does damage...”

The clones were burning, too. But that alone was not enough to make Atrocity drop.

“I'm not done yet!”

Pain's and Mii's teams were out there doing their part to weaken it. Her team had to keep up their end of the deal. The giant devil had stopped to fight them, its massive limbs taking aim at every Maple Tree member.

“Hang in there, everyone!” Maple said, gouging another wound into its flesh.

While Maple was going wild, the others split into two teams.

To avoid potential falling deaths, Mai and Yui were attacking from solid ground. Chrome stayed back to guard them.

“I'll keep you safe! It ain't moving, so do your worst!”

“““Okay!”””

They popped some doping seeds, climbed on Tsukimi and Yukimi, then charged in, hammers swinging.

“““Double Strike!”””

This did far more damage than anything Maple was doing, and the volume of red sparks was volcanic.

“““Double Impact!”””

With two hammers each, and the player base's highest attack, each of their blows was doing the kind of damage that would normally require the entire surviving player base. If they didn't have to worry about getting hit, that made them an even bigger threat.

But of course, the event finale wasn't that easy. A massive arm came down to swipe them away.

"Multi-Cover! Heavy Body!"

""Chrome!""

Given the scale of the beast, Chrome had expected some knockback and used a skill to cancel that. The arm hit his shield, and he deflected it. The arm itself was on fire, and those flames transferred to Chrome, but his recovery skills were so strong that he clung to life despite the blows raining down on him.

"Ha-ha, Maple handles this most of the time, so let me take a turn!"

""Thank you!""

They swung their hammers several more times; then there was a crack far louder than any before, and the graphics on the leg they'd been hammering began to look wounded. The devil fell to one knee.

"Interesting! This is working!"

Best to target the opposite leg next. Chrome hopped on Tsukimi, and the three of them raced off to destroy the other leg.

Meanwhile, the rest of the guild piled on Haku's body, which wound around the boss's body to give them footholds and let them slash away.

"Armored Arms! Fourth Blade: Whirlwind!"

"Quintuple Slash!"

As Kasumi and Sally sliced it up, Sou had taken Mai's shape and was dealing massive blunt-force damage.

Kanade's spells defended against the flames that belched in response, while Iz used items to keep everyone healthy.

"It's easy if you hit it from the back! Fight where the arms can't reach!"

"Yup, but it isn't *that* easy."

Like the day before, purple magic circles were spawning overhead—a moment later, flames enveloped them.

"Body of Flame! Guardian's Luster!"

Kanade's spells went off before the fires hit. All of them, pets included, were wreathed in red flames—a powerful resistance to the fire element—but that alone would not keep Sally alive. For that reason, he'd followed it with a single-target damage-nullification spell cast on her alone.

"That did it! Thanks, Kanade!"

"Got more where that came from."

"I'll handle healing—you keep attacking!"

As they did, the devil lurched. Mai and Yui had made it drop to

one knee.

Sally spied the wounded leg and figured out the proper strategy to fighting this thing.

“Kasumi, I’m going up! If we put the wings out of commission, we can stop these fires!”

“Oh, got it!”

Sally made platforms in the air and made a Waterway, swimming all the way up to the back. There, she found Maple, using Devour and firing artillery.

“Maple, you’re back?”

“Oh, Sally! There you are!”

Sally told Maple her wing plan, and Maple quickly joined her.

“Martyr’s Devotion!”

“You’re sure?”

“Yep, I said I’d keep you safe!”

In that case, they’d better kill this thing before it could hurt them. The two girls dashed off toward the base of the wings.

“I’ll make a platform! Ho...kay, here.”

Maple used Helping Hands to float some shields near the wings. That was all the footing Sally needed to fight.

“I’m off!”

“Go!”

Maple stared firing, and Sally slipped through with a Waterway, slashing as she went. Fire belched in response but couldn’t match her speed. She had shafts of water all around the wings and was swimming a circuit, her body spinning all the while, slashing as it rotated. Trying to take out both wings between the two of them.

But before that happened, she saw a sign of something new coming: The boss’s entire body began to glow with a purple light.

“Sally! Over here!”

Sally came bounding down the floating shields to Maple’s side, while Maple got Syrup out, making the turtle hover. A moment later, the devil’s entire body ignited—they escaped the ensuing inferno by the skin of their teeth. But that was merely the beginning. They were about to be inundated by fire from the sky.

Wreathed in fire, the devil roared. A visible sound wave passed over them doing piercing damage, and Maple soaked the damage for herself, Sally, and both pets all at once.

She’d been planning on busting Aegis out again, so everything but her shield was still her HP-boosting angel gear—but even so, this was enough to chew through all of that, activating Indomitable Guardian. They were too close to the source to dodge it, and she was instantly in the red. Neither had expected that, and even the always unflappable Sally freaked out a bit.

“Urgh...”

“Heal! Maple, Potion!”

While Sally hastily got hers topped up, the fires fell from above.

Far too big to dodge, and Aegis wasn't an option. Should they have the pets jump out in front of them? Sally's mind scrambled. How best to keep Maple alive? They'd nulled this the first time, so the power and damage ranges were unknown. Nothing was certain.

“Superspeed!”

“Yiikes!”

Sally threw her arms around Maple and hauled her body away, but those flames were coming up fast from behind.

She couldn't let that damage box hit Maple directly; her plan was to wait till the last possible second, then throw Maple, aiming for her to land outside the splash zone. As long as Maple was safe, Sally had skills that might let her survive it.

But just before she took those long odds, the wings were hit by torrential fires and blinding light, destroying them. Then the culprits swooped in low, grabbing each of the girls out of the air and flying them to safety.

“Pain!”

“Mii!”

“We arrived in the nick of time, but you've made good headway. Can't believe only eight of you did this.”

“And now we can go all out.”

Pain had flown in on Ray and Mii on Ignis.

They'd decided to leave anomaly mop-up to the rest of their guild members and come flying over. This was because as the giant boss's health dropped, it regularly spawned more anomalies, and they'd realized focusing only on those was getting them nowhere. They dodged through the flailing arms, flying out of range.

“If we don't stop that rain of fire fast, things'll only get worse. There are still other players left out there, but as the numbers drop, it'll likely start using that over and over.”

“The moment we get an opening, we'll go for the head. Brace yourselves.”

If they targeted that spot, every arm and those fire-belching circles would aim right at them. But if they didn't get through that, they stood no chance of doing major damage.

Readying herself for attack, Maple changed her gear, deployed her weapons, and had Syrup prep Spirit Cannon, too.

They dodged a bit longer, but then the devil's HP took another big hit. It had been hobbling around with one damaged limb, but now the other leg crumpled. It had to use several arms to support itself. It tried to charge the flames again, but the supply from the anomalies had

dried up. The six roving guild members had managed to hunt the last of the anomalies before the third fire shower.

Not about to let this chance escape them, the party swooped in. Through the fires flung at them, past the outstretched arms, and as they neared the faceless head, each unleashed their strongest move.

“Palidragon’s Lightsword!”

“Funeral Pyre!”

As they passed its head, Pain and Mii did tremendous damage. A moment later, Sally leaped off Ray, using a skill in midair to approach from the fore, dodging as the mouth opened wide, and getting herself in range of the head itself.

“Quintuple Slash!”

Wreathed in a blue aura, Sally’s combo sliced deep into the boss’s head. Maple had jumped down off Ignis onto Syrup, her weapon pointed their way. Timing things so she didn’t hit anyone else.

“Commence Assault! Hydra! Saturating Chaos! Syrup, Spirit Cannon!”

Mii’s attack had set it on fire. Pain’s had left it with a crumbling damage effect—like an unclean thing being purified. And Sally’s combo had piled damage on top of those.

Now there came a thunderous volley of bullets, lasers, and poison. To finish, Maple raised her shield and made the weapons behind her explode.

“Here goes...!”

The devil’s maw yawned wide, trying to chomp down on Maple, but she kept coming, holding up the shield that could swallow everything. Her blow struck home and gulped up everything, and then she gouged her way out the back of its throat. She came rolling through with damage sparks raining down on her.

Sally’s combo over, she spotted Maple and caught her, using webs and platforms to get out of Dodge.

“D-did we do it?”

“Hell yeah, Maple. Look.”

Maple turned toward the devil just as its HP hit 0. The purple flames gradually subsided, and the massive bulk burst into light. As it did, the map itself grew sunny once again—and all the swarms of devils vanished, too.

To their surprise, destroying this thing gave them all medals.

“Sally! Medals! We got medals! Three whole medals!”

“Ha-ha-ha... I feel like that was worth at least six, but I’ll take it.”

The rest of their guild came running over. Everyone was safe and sound and relieved the threat had perished.

“Hey! Come here! We did it!”

As they regrouped, a buzzer sounded, and the third day was done.

They'd survived the entire event and were sent back to the main map.



Post-event, Maple and Sally were lounging around the guild home, wondering how to use their medals.

"Whew, I'm glad it went well!"

"Yep. Co-oping with the other guilds really was the right play. You making friends with everyone in the fourth event and regularly playing together after really paid off."

"Mm-hmm, but still, I didn't expect anything *that* big."

"It's not that uncommon. Other games have lots of huge bosses that only go down if everyone works together."

"Huh, that sounds tough. But team-ups are fun!"

"They add more bosses like that, and you'll be in high demand! I mean, you've got that area protect."

"Eh-heh-heh. Oh, but I might not be able to keep up with everyone."

"If blasting yourself around's not in the cards, I'll carry you."

"You're so nice!"

"Heh-heh, I am."

This event had given them each enough medals to acquire a new skill. And that would help them get even better.

"We've gotta pick good skills and put them to work in the next event!"

"When is that?"

"Hmm, good question. A few months, maybe? Might get an eighth stratum first."

"Makes sense! Then, Sally, I've got a thing I wanna do."

"Hmm? I'm in—what is it?"

"We've done all these fighting events, so I wanna do some nice quiet exploring."

"Cool. Not like we've seen everything every stratum has to offer."

Each new layer was huge, with all kinds of hidden secrets and tourist spots they'd never gotten around to. Events and competitions were important, but so was having fun.

Sally nodded and decided to join Maple on a tour of every floor.

The event was over, and it was time to kick back again.



Post-event, the devs were looking over the results.

“Um, huh? They just...took it down?”

“That they did. Hm, we might have misjudged the HP. That said, I didn’t want it to be *too* high...”

It had been a fairly lethal monster, what with that map-wide AOE, and they’d figured the sheer size of it would convince players to keep their distance, leaving them running for their lives through the falling fires. But anything with HP *could* be killed. If they went all out against it, the creature’s own bulk would prevent it from targeting them accurately.

“Next time we do a giant monster, we’ll have to rethink some things.”

“Yeah...maybe a bit less attack and a bit more HP.”

Even with the event completed, the devs’ trial and error went on.



Shortly after Maple and Sally started NWO

◆ **Defense Build and Boss Speculation** ◆

Maple and Sally were headed to a dungeon. The plan was to beat the boss together.

“What kind of boss will it be? Any ideas, Maple?”

“Hmm... I already fought a dragon, so...hard to say. I haven’t really played that many games.”

“That’s fair. We should take our time and let you see more of what this game has to offer.”

“Oh! That sounds fun! And together, we can beat anything!”

Maple’s face lit up, and she threw her arms out wide in joy.

Which made Sally laugh.

“Right, as long as you keep your wits about you, you’ll be fine. Or even if you don’t!”

“What’s that m—? Aughhh!”

A slime came bounding in from behind, scored a clean hit, and knocked Maple down.

This surprised her, but did not actually do any damage.

“Whoops! Take this! Okay, got it. You back up, Maple?”

“Uh, mm-hmm. Just a bit rattled.”

“See? You’re fine even if they get the drop on you. The normal trash mobs on the road aren’t gonna do any damage.”

“But having them bump into me out of nowhere is bad for the heart! I’ve gotta learn to watch my back.”

She started swiveling her head.

“Well, that’s good practice in general. Makes it easier to respond.”

“I have eyes like an eagle’s! Like a hawk’s!”

“Do you, now? Well, let’s test those out in this boss fight.”

“Roger that! I’ll keep ’em peeled and find its weakness!”

Maple opened her eyes wide, then blinked several times.

Sally started giggling. “Glad you’re having fun.”

“I am! This is a good time. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Relieved to hear it. I was a *bit* pushy this time.”

“You’re *only* pushy when it comes to games.”

“...I mean, you know. They’re more fun together.”

“That, I agree with. Fine! I’ll let you off the hook this time!”

“Ah-ha-ha...thanks.”

“Eh-heh-heh. I meant it—I’m having fun.”

Kicking a few monsters out of their way together, occasionally breaking into a run, they chattered the whole time and never ran out of things to say.

“Sally, how long till we reach this dungeon?”

“We’re maybe three-quarters of the way there? Shouldn’t be much longer. Stay sharp.”

“Aye-aye! Oh, weren’t we trying to guess what the boss would be?”

“Right, I remember that. Yeah, I’m gonna go with a safe option like a big goblin.”

“Then I vote a bear with three heads and six arms!”

“Uh...you might wanna rein that in a bit.”

“Sometimes you gotta bet on a long shot!”

Either way, they made steady progress and were soon at their dungeon destination.

The confirmation of their predictions was at the end of the dungeon—where the actual boss was waiting.

◆ Defense Build and Material Gathering ◆

Maple and Sally were out gathering materials for Maple’s new equipment.

Until a minute ago, they’d been working separately, running around the forest and farming the monsters that dropped the materials they were after.

Once they had a decent pile, they regrouped to talk things over.

“Well, Maple? Think that’ll be enough?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. I’ve never had new gear made before, so I’m not really sure how much it takes.”

“Oh, right. Then let’s just err on the side of caution. Not like it ever hurts to have too much.”

“Really?”

“You’ll never manage to fill your inventory with this stuff, and maybe someday you’ll find another use for it.”

“Right. Oh, and I can always sell it! I really don’t have much money.”

“Totally valid. Speaking of which...do you wanna gather more, or are we good for now?”

Maple thought this over for a minute before answering.

“Can you help a little longer?”

“Mm-hmm, sure thing. I mean, you wanna get the best gear you can, right?”

“Yep!”

“Cool, then let’s farm awhile longer. From my perspective, the monsters here are proving to be good dodge practice, so it’s helping me level my skills.”

“That’s amazing, Sally! I have no idea what these monsters are gonna do next.”

“Yeah, I sure wouldn’t expect you to dodge them with your stats. But once you get used to it, I think you’ll learn to spot the patterns.”

“Really? You think I can?”

Maple took a few hops right and left, practicing evasion.

The shield in her hand wobbled a lot.

“Keep practicing. That’ll help you get better at blocking, too. And I’ll teach you any tricks I can.”

“Okay! I’ll give it a shot!”

“Then let’s go. You want more materials, right?”

“True! I’ll kill as many monsters as I can!”

Maple thrust her shield forward, miming an attack.

Her approach here was to hit monsters with a shield bash—which had proven effective against the monsters they were targeting.

“You should hit as long as your aim’s in the ballpark, but the closer you get to the center, the better you’ll do.”

“Got it! I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Okay, let’s push through these shrubs and find some bad guys!”

“Anyone out there?”

They headed into the underbrush, searching for the little creatures they needed.

“Maple, yell if you find some!”

“Same to you, Sally!”

They continued their search, calling back and forth and occasionally just chatting.

There were other trash mobs in this forest, but nothing that was a threat to the two of them. Their material farming went well and wrapped up in due time.

“Wow, Sally, thanks!”

“Anytime, heh-heh.”

Pleased with their results, they headed back to town.

◆ Defense Build and Sightseeing ◆

Maple and Sally were resting in the first town.

With no need to worry about calories, they could eat all the sweets they wanted.

When they finished, they raced out across the fields to do some sightseeing.

“You’re sooo fast!”

“Well, compared to you.”

Maple was once again on Sally’s back.

On her own, she was so slow, they’d have had no time to see any sights.

“The wind feels great!”

“Good to hear. But this transport method won’t work forever. We’re gonna have to figure something out eventually.”

“Is there any other way?”

“Doesn’t seem like they’ve made anything yet. Gotta wait for them to patch it in.”

“I certainly don’t want to make you carry me around forever. Let’s hope they fix it...”

Maple closed her eyes, thinking about it. She did have one idea.

“I wonder if crafters would know anything?”

“Good question. They do have, like, pull carts and such, but they’re class-specific, so they probably won’t have anything for you yet.”

“Oh. Shame.”

“Also, if they add bicycles or whatever, everyone slow like you would use them. Since we’re not seeing that, there probably isn’t anything.”

That made a lot of sense. Maple nodded.

“Fair. I’d totally get a bike if they had them. I bet you’re right.”

“So no use worrying about it now. Just my hunch speaking, but most games get movement options eventually.”

“Then as soon as they do, we’ll have to jump on it!”

“Well, if you can actually handle it.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“For example...they might require stats other than VIT. You haven’t raised anything else, right?”

“Urp. Right, I can see that happening. Argh, but...but...I dunno...”

Maple really wasn’t inclined to raise anything else. Her original goal had just been avoiding pain when she got hit, but soon she began to discover the fun side of raising only defense.

“No need to force a build change, Maple. I only care about you having fun here. Even if that means helping you get around. I know you’ll make up for it in the boss fight. We both do our part.”

“Thanks, but I do hope we find another way to get around!”

“Let’s hope so, yeah. I can’t always play with you, after all. Still, no rush.”

“Mm-hmm! I literally can’t.”

“True. Oh, we’re almost there.”

“Already? See, you’re fast!”

“Heh-heh, that I am.”

Off they ran.

Blowing away the occasional monster with spells and skills.

No monsters could block their progress, and they made a beeline for their destination.

“It’s supposed to be real pretty! Prepare to feast your eyes, Maple!”

“Will do! Can’t wait.”

“Last spurt!”

“Woo!”

Thinking of all the views yet unseen, Sally picked up her pace.

◆ Defense Build Before the Event ◆

The day the second event began, Maple and Sally were sitting on a bench in town, waiting for the admin announcement.

“Almost time, Maple. This is your second event, right?”

“Oh, yeah. I had no clue what I was doing last time, but it somehow worked out anyway! I hope this time’s the same.”

“We’ll see. This one’s likely to play out differently. But if we’re not sure what to do, we’ll just have to try things and see what sticks. That’s fun, too!”

“Could be, yeah! And I’ve got you with me.”

“Feel free to ask me anything. I may not always have an answer, though.”

But Sally’s smile looked confident.

“Heh-heh-heh...I will,” Maple promised.

“And I’ll do the same. If I can’t dodge something, I’ll need you to soak it for me.”

“Of course! I’ll be your bulwark!”

“And a stalwart one! But back to the point, we don’t know where we’re going or exactly what we’ll be doing there. And that means your defense’ll come in handy.”

“.....?”

Maple’s head drifted sideways, clearly lost.

“I mean, if we’re facing monsters that ambush us, you’ll do just fine. Being able to survive surprise attacks is a real asset.”

“Oh! I see. Yeah! Mm-hmm, then I’ll do just that and keep you safe.”

As they talked, the event start time approached. The streets were teeming with players making last-minute preparations, and the noise level was rising.

“Getting crowded.”

“Yup. Think there’re more players than just the ones here?”

“I’ll bet, yeah. No rule says you have to wait in town... Hmm.”

Sally stretched and took a deep breath.

“Nnngh, feels like I can really focus today.”

“I’ll have to get my head in the game, too.”

“Heh-heh. Just be yourself, Maple. Do what comes naturally, just like you always have. Play the way you want to and have fun.”

“.....! Okay, I can do that!”

“I’ll back what you do, so let’s just see what this event has to offer.”

Sally’s advice had Maple’s mind turning to the event ahead. And what might happen there.

“Hey, Maple, the announcement’s about to start. Make sure you listen closely.”

“Gotcha. Whew. Okay! I’m ready!”

Maple breathed out a long exhale, then looked dead ahead, eyes gleaming with anticipation.

The speakers placed throughout town began reading the final instructions.

They listened carefully, and when it was time for the launch, they glanced at each other.

“Here we go!”

“Yup! Let’s kick some ass!”

An excited smile on each face. White light rose up around them, and they were gone—off to the event map.

◆ Defense Build and to the Desert ◆

Having successfully defeated each other’s doppelgängers, Maple and Sally were reunited and talking as they walked through the woods.

“I’m glad you survived that, Maple. Despite everything that came after.”

“Your fault for teasing me, Sally.”

When they were reunited, Sally had proven she was real by teasing Maple about how she’d cried over a vaccine jab. Maple had gotten her revenge in spades.

“Yeah, well...that reminds me, you gonna get your flu shot this year?” Sally asked.

She’d brought it up...*the topic*.

Maple went stiff, and she was suddenly avoiding Sally’s gaze.

“I...I’ll, um, consider it...”

It did not sound like she would, so Sally shot her a look.

“Wh-what?”

“You’re not going to, are you?”

“.....”

“After that fever you got last year, you really should.”

Sally had come over to see her, and Maple had been flat out in bed, unable to sit up.

This happened to her *every* year.

“Urgh, I know... I wish I could raise my VIT in real life.”

“Then they’d have to deliver the vaccine with a drill.”

“I wouldn’t raise it that high! Okay, maybe I would.”

In-game, a drill would bounce right off her.

Sword, spears, axes, and hammers—it didn’t make a difference what hit Maple.

And yet Maple was still doing her best to boost her defense even higher.

“I might have to just drag you there.”

“Huh? Noooo...!”

Maple looked more scared than she’d been of any boss.

“It’s a few months off either way.”

“I’m fine... I’ll get through it somehow...”

As they spoke, the world in front of them opened up.

Before them lay an expansive desert with dry sand everywhere.

There was a blue sky above and little swirls of dust kicked up by the breeze.

“Wow, a desert!”

“It’s huge. I wonder how big it is...”

“Worth exploring?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

They stretched and then stepped out onto the sand.

“Plenty of dunes out here. Maple, take care you don’t lose your footing on the slopes.”

“Yeah, I know, I’ve got it... Aughhh!”

Even as she spoke, the sand crumbled underfoot, and she went sliding away.

“Uh...augh!”

Sally had been walking in front of Maple, who slid right into the backs of her legs and knocked her over. She fell right on top of Maple.

“Ah-ha-ha...sorry.”

“No prob... Augh, I’ve got sand all over me.”

Sally hopped up and started dusting herself off.

Then she held out a hand. Maple took it and carefully got back up, brushing the sand out of her hair.

“Not a great start, but not the worst this desert will have for us.”

“True! Gotta be careful!”

Once more, they set off into the great sandy beyond.

◆ Defense Build and Setting Out Again ◆

Maple and Sally scored big and ended the second event in style.

Until the next event arrived, they could go back to enjoying the game at their leisure.

They were sitting on that bench in town again, chatting.

“That was fun! We saw so many different places.”

“We did,” Sally said, turning to face Maple. “We got a good amount of exploring done and saw the bulk of it.”

“Did we? I mean, it *was* pretty big. But I think we saw enough.”

“I kinda hope the next event isn’t about exploring. It really takes a lot out of me.”

“True. We’ve always gotta watch for monsters.”

“You don’t really have to, though.”

“Oh?” Maple blinked at her.

“I mean, ambushes don’t even make you flinch,” Sally explained. “You get hit in the back with a hammer, it’s just...a surprise. That makes a big difference.”

“Heh-heh-heh...I work out,” Maple said, laughing it off.

“If just training did that, everyone would be at your level...but I guess piercing attacks do make a difference. We’ll need to plan for that.”

They’d run into them several times, and Maple had definitely struggled.

Somehow, they’d pulled through, but there was no guarantee that would work again.

“Urgh...I know. Is there no way to get a pierce-resistant body?”

“If there was, you’d no longer count as a player. I figure if you get a little better with your shield, you’ll have no issues.”

Maple was a bit too reliant on her overwhelming defense.

For that reason, she couldn’t dodge at all and had remained clumsy with her great shield.

“I did practice some, but...it’s gonna take a while. It’s hard!”

“It’s just a suggestion—no need to fret over it. I’ll make up where you falter, so remember to have fun first!”

Maple decided not to think about anything she didn’t want to.

“Then I’ll just keep raising my defense so everything non-piercing can’t hurt me! I dunno how far it can go, though.”

But her future was set in stone.

Maple had no plans to do anything but boost her defense.

And that was probably the best way for her to keep getting stronger.

“Then we’ve gotta find a way to block piercing damage...and raise your defense further,” Sally said.

Maple nodded and hopped up off the bench.

They’d agreed they’d had enough of exploring, but before they knew it, they were headed out again.

“Where do we start?”

“The information boards. They might have something you need!”

“Or something you do, Sally!”

Their destination: the center of town.

They headed there together.

◆ Defense Build and the Mushroom Hunt ◆

One fine day, Maple had once again logged into the game.

Today, she had no particular goal in mind; she just had the time and decided to pop by her guild home.

“What should I do today?”

She opened the door and stepped in, pondering the question, when someone called out to her.

“Oh, Maple! You’re here today?”

Iz stepped out of the back room, having just finished up a crafting job.

“Iz! Yep, but...I’m not really sure what to do with myself.”

“Then can I ask a favor?”

“Totally! Um, what?” Maple asked.

Iz explained that she needed a bunch of items found around the second stratum: mushrooms, herbs, nuts, etc. And she needed help gathering them.

“Um, do I need a relevant skill...?”

“Not at all. I just need them to unlock more food recipes, but there are monsters around that use Paralyze, so I’d struggle on my own. I’ll make it up to you, of course.”

“.....! Then just let me try the food once you make it!”

That was easily done, so Iz readily agreed and sent Maple a message with photos of the items they were looking for.

“Okay, I get it. Cool, I’ll find as many as I can!”

With that, Maple flew out of the guild home.

“Be careful... Well, it’s Maple; guess she doesn’t need to be,” Iz murmured and waved her away.

Outside the home, Maple made a beeline through the streets to the field beyond, headed for the item location. As she passed the town exit, she saw a familiar face coming back in.

“Hey, Sally!”

“Oh? Maple? Grinding levels?”

“Um, Iz asked me to go gather some stuff. You wanna come?”

Maple explained that the reward was good eats.

“Hmm, I could go for that. I wasn’t really feeling the usual grind.”

“Heh-heh-heh, you’ve gotta take it easy sometimes.”

“True that. So where we going?”

Maple opened up her map and pointed to the spot Iz had shown

her. She also shared the pics of their quarry.

“Um, here! It’s not that far.”

“Yeah, we can just stroll on over and still get there in no time.”

“Then let’s chat as we go!”

“Fine by me.”

They started speculating about what the next stratum would be like, chatting about what quests they’d found, and before they knew it, they’d reached their destination.

“The stuff from the photos, right?”

“Yep! She said there’s nothing you could confuse them with, which makes it easy.”

“Should we go our separate ways? The monsters here ain’t nothing.”

“Then let’s regroup here in a bit!”

“Cool.”

They set a specific time, and then Maple headed into the forest.

“Better find what I can,” Sally said, heading to the opposite side.

Not long after, Sally had enough mushrooms and herbs and was taking a breather.

“Better head back.”

She glanced over her haul and turned toward the forest entrance.

But Maple was nowhere to be found. Sally waited awhile, but there was no sign of her.

“Maybe I’d better go look. She’s not usually this late. And she *is* on the map...”

Propping her map open, Sally headed into the trees again. No long after, she heard Maple’s voice through the brush.

“Hokay...Maple? Hmm?”

She parted the shrubbery and found Maple holding a mushroom in one hand—from the purple and red spots, it was clearly a poisonous one—with her teeth tearing pieces off a two-yard-tall mushroom-shaped monster.

“Um.”

“Nom-nom-nom! Mmmm... Oh, Sally! Just a minute!”

The mushroom was spraying paralytic powder, but Maple didn’t seem to mind. She picked her black shield up off the ground and swung it; Devour instantly gobbled up the monster.

“Sorry, I found some other mushrooms and got distracted.”

“...We’ll have a good meal waiting for us, so no need to pig out here.”

“These are pretty tasty! Nice and spicy.”

She flung the purple mushroom into her mouth.

“That’s because its poisonous?! I’ll have to pass.”

“Probably... But in real life, you couldn’t eat them! You’re missing out on so many flavors!”

“Well, glad you’re having fun? I suppose outside, you don’t get to eat many poisonous or walking mushrooms, true.”

“And this is just a game, so I never get full! Or fat!” Maple exclaimed.

Sally reported her progress with the gathering.

“So maybe stop experimenting with weird mushrooms and let’s go get this feast. That way, I can join you.”

“Fair! I got plenty myself.”

“None that moved, right? Or were poisonous?”

Maple nodded emphatically.

“You sampled them?”

“You should go for Poison Nullification, too, Sally.”

“Even if I did, I likely wouldn’t use it like you do.”

Not wanting to keep Iz waiting, they headed back to the guild home.

◆ Defense Build and Gear ◆

While the third event was running, Maple and Sally took a moment to sit on a bench in town and discuss their current gear loadouts.

Specifically, the fluffy gear Iz had made for them out of the sheep's wool. She'd kept the fluffy aspect toned down to avoid interfering with their movements, but the very concept clearly thrilled Maple to no end.

"It looks good on you, Maple."

"It does?! Thanks! I wish I could wear it forever!"

Maple patted the fluffy part of her hat.

"The defensive aspect of it ain't that high, so once this event is over, it'll just be something you wear when you feel like it. It really is only for this event."

Like Maple, Sally was dressed in fluffy white gear. Unlike her, she had her usual scarf on over it.

"But you look so good!"

"Yeah? I've certainly never worn anything like it before, so it is new for me."

Maple thought about that a minute.

"I don't have that much gear yet. Most of the time, my black armor is enough. It is strong."

"In your case, that set's specs are so nuts, you *would* end up stuck in them. But I think it's worth trying other stuff out sometimes. For fun."

"Yeah! I like that idea."

Maple remembered seeing lots of equipment for sale in town.

And she wanted to try out the sort of costumes you could wear only in games.

"Think about it this way: You don't always need to worry about what the gear actually does. You could always just pick stuff you like the look of and swap back once you've gotta fight a tough boss."

"True... Sally, do you know where they sell the good stuff? Cute gear like this?!"

Maple pointed at the wooly costume she had on.

Sally quickly ran over her mental checklist, combing through her game knowledge for this request, but came up empty.

"Hmm, maybe you'd be better off talking to Iz. But finding it

yourself is also fun, right?"

"Absolutely!" Maple nodded a lot, eyes sparkling.

Sally couldn't help but grin. She stood up.

"Then let's go hit the boards, see what info we can turn up. Maybe they've got gear like that in a dungeon somewhere."

"Ooh! Oh, but the event's still going..."

"No need to worry about that. Your fun is the top priority."

This reassurance made Maple nod and scramble to her feet.

"Then let's go! Um...which way?"

Maple had barely ever checked the information boards, so she didn't even know where to find them.

"It does help to scope them out sometimes. Or you might miss something you'd like!"

"Urgh, r-right! Let's do that, then."

That really drove home the importance of it. But there were always so many other fun things to do.

And all those distractions ensured she almost never checked the boards.

◆ Defense Build and a Dynamic Duo ◆

Chrome and Kasumi were walking together in the third-stratum town.

Maple had brought them together, and these days they often teamed up to explore. The third-stratum town sold lots of flying machines, and they'd each acquired one. But today, they were aimlessly wandering the streets, which was best done on foot.

"I just don't stumble across crazy skills the way Maple does."

"Which is how it's supposed to work..."

Remembering the skills Maple had told them about and the feats she'd accomplished...they both winced.

"She's great to have on our side, but I'm also a Great Shielder, so it doesn't leave me much to do."

"Personally, I'd take you over her every time, Chrome," Kasumi said.

He shot her a look of surprise, and she smirked, elaborating.

"Far less likely to give me a heart attack."

"...Fair. Ain't no swords gonna bounce off my head. Couldn't do that even if I tried."

"Exactly. That one's best left to her."

As they talked, they checked out a few quests, then decided to head to the field to grind a few levels.

The third stratum was the game's current front line, and the monsters roaming the fields were pretty strong. But since they were

both top players, they weren't expecting any trouble.

"Shall we fly? Makes it easier outside town."

"That it does."

They both equipped back-mounted machines and took to the skies.

"Didn't think they'd be so fast about giving us a way to fly without Syrup around."

"...That's an exception."

"Indeed."

Speak of the devil. Not long into their flight, they saw an unmistakable green blob on the horizon.

A turtle, bobbing across the sky.

Only one creature could do that: Maple's pet, Syrup.

"...There she goes."

"Indeed. Who else?"

They flew toward the flying turtle.

Machine flight was much faster, so they soon closed the distance and saw the girl riding on the turtle's back.

".....? Oh! Hey!"

Like they'd imagined, it was Maple. She spotted them coming and started waving.

"We just happened by. Wanna join us for some monster grinding?"

"If you're headed this way...were you after the same thing, Maple?"

Chrome and Kasumi knew that ahead of them lay an area with monsters that gave prime XP.

"Huh? No, I'm just out for a walk. Or I guess it's technically a flight? Right, Syrup?"

Maple gave the turtle's shell a rub. This was very her.

"But I don't mind helping!" she said, thrusting her shield forward.

"Well, good! You're always an asset."

And thus, the duo became a trio.

But since she had Syrup, Maple hadn't purchased a flying machine, and they had to slow down to match her speed.

"Sorry I'm so slow!"

"Not a problem."

"We don't mind."

"It's very Maple."

"I-it is? What's that mean?"

Laughing about that, they flew away.

◆ Defense Build and Making Stuff ◆

The sound of hammer on steel echoed from the back room of Maple Tree's third-stratum guild home.

After Maple invited Iz to join them, she'd moved her workshop here.

The walls were lined with blacksmith tools, finished weapons, and armor. Iz completed her immediate workload and put her tools away, then stepped out.

"Whew...got through my maintenance list, at least. Time for a breather."

Iz headed back to her private quarters, made a cup of coffee, and settled down on a chair.

She'd made almost every piece of furniture in her room, and one side of it was filled with plants she was growing—materials for potions and medicines.

"I'm done with what I *have* to do, so now what?"

Long before she'd joined Maple's guild, Iz had been crafting gear and doing maintenance on it for a lengthy list of player clients. Chrome was just one of many.

She was taking care of her guild's gear, too, so she had even more on her plate.

But that just thrilled her to no end.

"Seems like they're all happy with their current loadouts, though... *Sigh*, won't anyone ask for a new set?"

Shortly after they're reached the third stratum, she'd made new gear for Maple, Sally, Kanade, and the guild's newest members, Mai and Yui. All in rapid succession.

Some people might consider that more than enough, but for Iz, that just made her eager to make even more stuff.

"Okay! Once I'm done with this coffee, I'm gonna make something worthwhile. If the stats on it are good enough, someone'll use it someday!"

She thumped a fist to her palm like this was a great idea, nodding. These days, Iz frequently finished up her routine work and launched right into new crafting.

She drained the last of her coffee, cleaned up, and pranced back to her workshop.

Inside, she opened the chest she kept her materials in and froze.

"....."

There was nothing left inside worth using. She had enough to do basic repairs, but nothing beyond that.

"Urgh...augh..."

She looked again, but the number of materials did not increase.

On the wall was a magnificent greatsword she'd spent the bulk of the day before making. Next to it stood the spear she'd made the

previous day. She'd thoroughly enjoyed both crafting jobs, but nobody in this guild could use either.

"Yeah...I know... Given what events may bring our way, I really should be focusing on gathering materials right now."

Looking dejected, she left her workshop behind and headed for the bulletin boards, hoping to hire someone outside her guild to gather for her.

"But I might have to venture out into the field myself if I want anything good..."

Given how few materials she had left, that did seem necessary.

◆ Defense Build and Innovation ◆

Once again, Maple was prowling the streets of the fourth-stratum town, hoping she could find some new skill. To make up for her walking speed, she rode a rickshaw to her destination.

“Hmm, that didn’t work out... Let’s try another direction!”

But the more information she gathered, the more she found out about skills she didn’t need or couldn’t even get.

“There just aren’t many skills you can get with low stats. Hmm, let’s try outside of town.”

The fourth-stratum town was by far the largest the game offered, and almost no one had seen the whole of it. But that didn’t mean you could ignore the *rest* of the map.

Since she couldn’t use Atrocity in town, Maple had to pay for rides to get around.

And the cost of those was adding up.

“The fields are much easier going!”

Maple hopped on another rickshaw and pointed for the outskirts of town.

“Onward! Woo, so fast!”

It wasn’t really that fast, but it was definitely faster than she was. And it wasn’t long before she reached the border.

“Okay! Now where? Hmm, is that...?”

As she considered the matter, she saw a familiar face and went running over.

“Oh, Maple? Thanks for the other day. You still getting stronger?”

It was Flame Empire’s sterling swordsman, Shin. He looked pleased to see her.

She’d gone hunting with Flame Empire over Christmas, and the members of the two guilds had grown closer.

“Um, I’m not finding good skills. It can be hard.”

“Yeah, but frankly, I wouldn’t want you finding them all the time. No one else would stand a chance.”

“Heh-heh-heh! I’m still gonna keep trying!”

“I’m working on getting myself ready for a rematch. I won’t go down easily!”

“Neither will I!”

They talked for a bit; then Shin used Splinter Sword to turn his blade into a bunch of little shards and had them fly around killing

monsters for XP. Maple wound up joining him and hunting monsters herself.

“That is a cool skill.”

“I dig it, yeah. It’s cool and strong!”

Even as he spoke, his flying blades killed another beast.

Seeing him go at it, an idea struck Maple.

“Have you tried riding those blades around?”

“Huh? Uh, no. Wait...*can* you ride them?”

He’d never tried, so he didn’t have the slightest clue.

“I bet I could fly even faster if I could ride my bullets!” she said.

“If only I could...”

“Ha-ha, well, I’ll have to try some time,” he said.

And thus, when he least expected it, Shin received an idea that might lead to a new skill.

Hello to anyone who just happened to pick up Volume 9! And thank you to anyone who's been reading all this time. I'm Yuumikan.

It's been a while since Volume 8, and the anime is currently airing. What do you think? If you're enjoying it, I couldn't be happier. I didn't really have anything to do with it, but I can say for sure that it's turned out well. They've really captured the appeal of Maple and Sally and the vibe of the series as a whole, so I couldn't be happier.

If the TV series got you interested in the source material, then that's another thing to be grateful for. The novels, manga, and anime all have their differences, and I hope you enjoy them each in their own right. The TV version is the first with voices and movement, which I think provokes a very different reaction than the manga did. It started out as just words, then got books with illustrations, then a manga that fleshed out every beat, and now an anime that makes it all move. It's a marvel that I ever came this far, and I'm always thankful. There are so many works out there, but for so many to have chosen this one is an honor I will never forget.

And in January there was an anthology, too. How do other people see my characters? How would they draw them? A work that once existed only inside my head now is depicted in so many different ways. It's fascinating. An experience like no other. Looking at the similarities and differences among the participants' interpretations is a pleasure you can only get from an anthology. I highly recommend it.

But now it's time I brought this afterword to a close.

Look forward to more anime, manga, and, of course, the novels!

The story's getting bigger.

And I'm just doing what I can.

I hope you'll continue following what *Bofuri* does.

And that you are looking forward to Volume 10 someday!

Yuumikan

Short Story Collection: First Appearances

- Defense Build and Boss Speculation, v1 Animate Retailer Bonus

- Defense Build and Material Gathering, v1 Gamer Retailer Bonus
- Defense Build and Sightseeing, v1 Toranoana Retailer Bonus
- Defense Build Before the Event, v2 Gamers Retailer Bonus
- Defense Build and To the Desert, v2 Animate Retailer Bonus
- Defense Build and Setting Out Again, v2 Toranoana Retailer Bonus
- Defense Build and the Mushroom Hunt, Find Your Own *Isekai!* Fair, Fall Appetites
- Defense Build and Gear, v3 Gamers Retailer Bonus
- Defense Build and a Dynamic Duo, v3 Animate Retailer Bonus
- Defense Build and Making Stuff, v3 Toranoana Retailer Bonus
- Defense Build and Innovation, v5 Tsutaya Retailer Bonus

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